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MOHAWKS

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "VIXEN,"
"ISHMAEL,"

ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

LONDON
JOHN AND ROBERT MAXWELL
MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET
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MOHAWKS

CHAPTER I.

"YOU CALLED ME, AND I CAME HOME TO YOUR HEART."

ANOTHER revolution of the social wheel. Summer was over, and Twickenham, Richmond, Bath, and Tunbridge Wells were deserted for the new squares and narrow streets between Soho and Hyde Park Corner. The theatres in Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn were open every night, the opera-house in the Haymarket was crowded, and drums and assemblies, concerts and quadrille-parties, filled the very air with excitement. 'Twas said the young people were younger than they used to be, and all the old had grown young. The new reign began in a blaze of gaiety; King and Queen, flushed with the sense of power, delighted to occupy the first place after having

so long held the second rank; conscious, too, of a handsome exchequer, and a clever minister who could change stones into gold; at peace with other nations, and with leisure to enjoy themselves.

The King had only one objection to London, and that extended to the whole of his British dominions. He would rather have been in Hanover. It needed all her Majesty's subtlety, all Lady Suffolk's subservient devotion, all Walpole's strenuous arguments, to keep him contented at St. James's or Kensington, when his inclinations all pointed to the old German home, and the old German ways of thinking and living.

Lady Judith Topsparkle was a favourite at the new Court. Her beauty and vivacity made her conspicuous even where many other women were beautiful and vivacious. She and Mary Hervey were sworn friends, and Lord Hervey raved about her fine eyes and her sharp tongue. Lady Mary Montagu praised her, and won her money at ombre, being by far the luckier player. Lady Judith's afternoon card-parties, to which only women were admitted, had become the rage. The house in Soho

was thronged with hoops and high heads, and although only ladies were allowed a seat at any of the tables, the men soon forced an entrance, and assisted as spectators, sometimes betting furiously on the progress of the game.

Mr. Topsparkle went in and out, shrugged his shoulders with his highly Parisian shrug, and said very little. The play was supposed to be a gentle feminine business, for very modest stakes. The sums that were spoken of seemed almost contemptible for such fine ladies. But these fair ones had a jargon of their own; they talked and counted in a cipher, and the coins that changed hands in public were but symbols of the debts that were to be paid in private next morning.

"I protest, Lady Judith, I owe you a crown," cried Lady Hervey.

"And I am Lady Polwhele's debtor for a guinea," said Lady Judith, producing the coin from a toy purse; and next morning Juba carried a letter lined with bank-notes from Lady Judith to the Dowager, while Judith received a heartrending plea for grace from a chaplain's wife who had lost half a year of her

husband's stipend to her ladyship on a previous afternoon.

Topsparkle called these assemblies the mysteries of the Bona Dea.

"And I'll warrant," said Bolingbroke, "there is always Clodius somewhere in hiding among the hoops and powder, were there only a mother-in-law to unearth him."

Durnford called occasionally in Soho Square to satisfy Lavendale, who was now at his house in Bloomsbury, living in the seclusion of a hermit, although the town with all its pleasures was at his elbow. He looked very ill, and was the victim of an abiding melancholy which moved his friend to deepest compassion. To oblige him, Durnford left his quiet lodging by Russell Street, and took up his quarters in Bloomsbury Square, where he had a whole suite of rooms to himself, and where he was able to keep an eye upon his friend, whose condition filled him with alarm.

He had somewhat agreeable business in hand just now in the production of his play, which was to be brought out at Drury Lane by his Majesty's company

of comedians. Upon the success of this play his future and his marriage in some wise depended, for the production of a successful comedy would at once place him in the highest literary rank. The actors were all sanguine of success, and were pleased at the idea of putting forward a new man. Mr. Cibber declared that *An Old Story* was the best comedy that had been written since *The Conscious Lovers*.

"I wish poor Dick Steele were in health to applaud your play, Mr. Durnford," said the manager. "He was ever generous to a young rival. He would have made the reputation of Savage, had that wild youth been of a less difficult temper. But, alas, Sir Richard is but a wreck, wheeled about in a Bath-chair at his retreat in Shropshire, and with Death walking at his elbow."

The play was a success. Mrs. Oldfield, the brilliant, the elegant Nancy Oldfield, the most admired and indulged of her sex, who could violate all the laws of decorum, and yet be received and courted in the politest society, the finest comedy actress in that age of fine acting, condescended to appear in Mr. Durnford's piece, and her performance

of a character of the Lady Betty Modish type, with Wilks as her lover, ravished the town. She had more grace, more distinction, than any woman of quality in London; she was the very quintessence of a fine lady, concentrating in her own person all the airs and graces, caprices and *minauderies*, of half a dozen fashionable coquettes, adopting a shrug from one, a wave of the fan from another, a twirl of her hoop from a third—bewitching and enchanting her audience, albeit her beauty had long been on the wane, and she was well over forty. It was the last comedy part she ever studied; and she would scarce have undertaken it but for Mr. Durnford's reputation as a man of some slight fashion, and the bosom friend of Lavendale.

Nor was Wilks, the famous Sir Harry Wildair, less admirable as a fine gentleman than Mrs. Oldfield as a fine lady. A young man of good family and liberal education, he had made his *début* in Dublin the year after the Revolution, and coming thence to London, he had quickly caught the grace and dash of the bucks and bloods of that statelier period. As the periwig shortened and manners relaxed, he

had cultivated the more careless style of the Hanoverian era, with all its butterfly graces and audacious swagger. There was an insolent self-assurance in his love-making which delighted the fine ladies of the period, with whom modesty and reverence for womanhood were at a discount. Durnford knew Wilks intimately as a boon companion and as an actor. He had taken the exact measure of the veteran comedian's talents and capacities; and in the middle-aged fop of quality had produced a character which promised to become as popular as Wildair or Lord Townley.

All the town rushed to see *An Old Story*, and the patentees were eager for future comedies from the same hand. A single comedy had made Congreve independent for life; and with the success of his play Herrick Durnford felt that his prosperity as a literary worker was assured. He had tried his pen in the various departments of literature, and had been successful in all. He had won for himself a certain standing in the House of Commons, and had Walpole's promise of a place. In a word, he was as well able to marry as Richard Steele was when he

took unto himself the wayward and capricious Mrs. Molly Scurlock, and he had all Steele's pluck, and a good deal more than Steele's industry.

Now then he resolved upon a step which to the outer world would have seemed desperate even to madness, a reckless throwing away of fortune. He resolved upon carrying off the Squire's heiress, and marrying her off-hand at the little chapel which Parson Keith had lately established in Curzon Street. He had always had a Mayfair marriage in his mind as the last revolt against tyranny, and he had reasons for deciding that the time had come when that revolt should be made.

It rested with Irene to give or to withhold her consent to this strong measure. He meant to use no undue persuasion. Freely must she come to his arms, as he had told himself in the dawning of their love. He had not set himself to steal her, but to win her.

When *An Old Story* had run fifteen nights, and had been applauded and approved by all the town, from their Majesties and the Court to the misses in the side-boxes, the apprentices in the shilling gallery,

and the orange-girls in the pit, Herrick rode down to Lavendale Manor one October morning, and contrived a meeting by the old oak fence in the waning light between five and six o'clock in the evening. His ever-willing Mercury had conveyed a note to Miss Bosworth, and she was first at the trysting-place.

"My dearest, this is so good of you," said Herrick, as he clasped her to his breast and kissed the shy, half-reluctant lips.

"'Twas selfish curiosity brought me," she answered. "I have been expiring with anxiety to hear about your play. My father's newspapers told me so little, though they told me 'twas the best comedy that had been written for years; and it's so hard we cannot write to each other freely. I have been pining for a letter."

"Dearest, the time is past for secret letters and stolen meetings. The hour has struck for boldness and liberty — for open, happy, unassailable love. Irene, you have told me more than once that you do not value wealth."

"And I tell you so again," she answered.

"And that you would freely renounce a great fortune to be my wife, the mistress of a modest unluxurious home, such as I am now able to support."

"I think you know that I would be happier with you in a hovel than with any other husband in a palace," she said, in a low sweet voice that thrilled him, and with drooping eyelids, as if she were half ashamed at the boldness of her confession.

"Then break your chains, Rena; fly with the lover who adores you; steal away in the early dawn to-morrow; steal across the park with foot as light and form as graceful as the young fawn's yonder. Meet me at the wicket that opens on the road. I will have a carriage-and-four ready to receive you. I'll whip you up in my arms and carry you off as Jove carried Europa, and we shall be well over the first stage to London before your gaolers discover their captive has escaped. I saw Parson Keith last night; he will be ready to marry us at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, and his ceremonial will be just as binding as if we were married by an archbishop."

"But can I disobey my father, prove myself an ungrateful daughter?" asked Irene, with a distressed air.

She had been woman enough to know that this crisis in her life must come sooner or later; that love would not wait for ever. She had pondered upon this crucial question in many an hour of solitude, and now it had come and must be answered.

"Dear love, you have to choose between that tyrannic father and me," pleaded Herrick, with impassioned earnestness; "the time has come for that choice to be made. I have hung back hitherto, fearful to trust the future; but I am now assured of a literary career and of Sir Robert Walpole's friendship and patronage. I can afford to tempt fortune so far as to take a wife. I am secure of keeping a roof over my darling's head, and that the pinch of poverty shall never be hers."

"I am not afraid of poverty—I only fear to offend my father."

"That is a hazard which must be run, Irene. We have tried to be dutiful, both of us. I addressed him honourably as a suitor for your hand; urged

upon him that my prospects were not hopeless, that I was industrious, patient, and had begun to earn my living. He rejected my proposals with contempt, treated me as harshly as ever miserly hidalgo in a Spanish comedy treated his daughter's suitor. If you are ever to be mine, Rena, you must brave your father's anger. You will never be mine with his consent, and 'tis ill waiting for dead men's shoes, saying we will put off our happiness till the old man is in his coffin. Let us be happy in spite of him. When the deed is done, I have a way to win him to forgive us both."

"What way, Herrick?" she asked eagerly.

"That is my secret, which I will reveal only to my wife."

"Ah, that is playing on my curiosity to win me to rebellion."

"Not rebellion, Rena; only natural revolt against an unendurable tyranny."

"Do you think he will ever forgive?"

"He will, he must. He will have no right to be angry, from the moment he knows my secret."

"You torture me with your enigmas. Why will you not tell me?"

"To my wife, my wife only," he whispered, drawing her to his breast once again, and stifling her questions with kisses. "That secret is for none but my wife's ear: but, as I am a man of honour, Irene, you will stand free of all reproach for undutifulness. You can look Squire Bosworth in the face and say, 'I am no rebellious daughter;' and if he has a spark of generosity in him he shall take you to his heart as I do now, and give you love for love."

"He is not ungenerous," said Irene. "But I wish you would be less mysterious."

"There shall be no mysteries when I am your husband. And now, love, say that you will come. I have done my part towards your father as a man of honour. I have worked hard as journalist and politician for wife and home. Am I to be disappointed of my reward?"

"No, love," she answered, "you shall not be cheated. I will be your wife; even at the risk of never seeing my father's face again."

He thanked and blest her, in a rapture of love

and gratitude; and then came a reiteration of his instructions. She was to creep out of the house before the servants were up; they rose at daybreak, but she must be before them. There was a glass door in the white parlour where they had all dined together—Lavendale, Herrick, the Squire, and his daughter—so often last year. This door opened into the garden, and was fastened with bolts which could be easily withdrawn; especially if Irene would but take the trouble to oil the fastenings overnight, to guard against any tell-tale scrooping of the iron. Then, cloaked and warmly clad, she was to skirt the shrubberies and cross the park to the wicket-gate. There Herrick and his coach would be in readiness; and all the rest was a question of fleet horses and quick relays, of which it was the lover's business to make sure overnight.

"I shall ride to Esher and on to Kingston, and make all preparations before ten o'clock," he said.

Irene was not like Lady Judith. She never thought of her gowns, or asked how she was to carry away her clothes. Not more than the lilies

of the field did she consider her raiment in this solemn crisis of her life. She only knew that soon after daybreak to-morrow morning she would be in her lover's arms, speeding away along the London road to be wedded and made one with him for ever. That she was to leave a noble inheritance and all her frocks and furbelows behind her troubled her not the least. She had no lust for finery, or to shine and dazzle in some new sphere. Blindly, and with a childlike confidence, she threw herself into her lover's arms, believing him wisest and best among all mankind.

So in the gray cold October dawn those two met at the wicket-gate, the coach and four horses standing ready a little way along the road. There had been nothing to hinder Irene's flight, albeit her sharpest gaoler, Mrs. Layburne, lay wakeful and restless as the girl's light foot passed her chamber-door. Irene heard the short dry cough, and the quick impatient sigh that followed; and she knew that her father's mysterious housekeeper was lying there, sleepless and suffering.

"My glorious girl," cried Herrick, as he hurried

her to the carriage, "I half feared your courage might fail you."

"There was no fear of that, Herrick," she answered quietly; "but I felt myself a rebel and an undutiful daughter as I crept past my father's room."

"You will not think that to-morrow."

"To-morrow! What do you mean by to-morrow?"

"Only that I intend to beard the lion in his den, Irene, or in other words to ask the Squire's pardon as soon as you are so fast my wife that no fury of his can part us. We will not behave as most run-away lovers do, go and hide themselves and wait for Providence to melt the paternal heart. We will go straight to the tyrant, and say, 'You see, love is stronger than self-interest. It is not your fortune we want, but your love;' and if he has a heart he will forgive us both, Irene."

"I hope he will," she murmured despondently.

"You hope, but you don't believe. Well, we shall see. And now tell me, sweet, how is the Squire's housekeeper, Mrs. Layburne?"

"Very ill. Indeed, Herrick, I fear the poor soul has not many weeks, or perhaps many days, to live. It is a sad and lonely ending. She shuns all sympathy, and waits for death in a proud silence which has an awful air. Alas, I fear she lacks all the consolations of piety. I have offered to read to her, to pray with her; but she refused with open scorn. She will have nothing to say to Mademoiselle, who is all kindness. Bridget detests her, and yet tries to nurse her and to do all she can to lessen her sufferings: but it is an unthankful office. My father looks miserable, and I think the presence of that dying woman in the house overshadows his life. He has not been to London for weeks. He sits alone in his study, reading or writing, as if he were waiting for Mrs. Layburne's death. Mademoiselle and I have hardly seen him from day to day, yet last year we were all three so happy together. He used always to dine and spend his evenings with us; but now he dines alone, and is shut up in his study till midnight."

The horses were tearing along the London road, past breezy commons and low-wooded hills, between

which flashed now and then a distant glimpse of the river—a silvery streak across the gray of the autumn landscape. Herrick put his head out of the coach window once in a quarter of an hour, to survey the road behind him ; but there was no sign of pursuit. The chances were that Irene's absence would not be discovered till eight o'clock, the usual breakfast-hour; and it was not yet seven. They had a clear hour before them.

They changed horses at Kingston, and were crossing Wimbledon Common at eight. The strong fresh horses tore down the hill into Wandsworth, and now Herrick felt that his prize was won. From Wandsworth to the ferry between Lambeth and Westminster was but half an hour's drive. The Abbey clock was striking nine as they stepped into the ferry-boat.

A hackney coach was waiting for them on the other side, bespoken by Durnford before he left London on the previous day, a coach which carried them to Curzon Street in a quarter of an hour, and there was Parson Keith in his surplice, ready to begin the ceremony.

How solemn and how sweet the service sounded to those true lovers, as they stood side by side before the communion-table, in the shabby little chapel which was to be the scene of so many a clandestine union, of so many a love-match doomed to end in mutual aversion! But here Fate promised a more consistent future. Here was no transient passion, born but to die, no will-o'-the-wisp love, leading the lovers over swamps and perilous places, to expire in a quagmire, but a pure and steady flame that would light their pathway to the close of life.

Durnford left the chapel with his bride on his arm, half expecting to meet Squire Bosworth on the threshold, just half an hour too late to hinder the marriage. He would be likely to guess that the runaway couple would go straight to Parson Keith. But there was no furious father, only the jarvey nodding on his box, and a handful of vagabonds and idlers demanding largesse from the bridegroom, a scurvy crew who always gathered from the adjacent alleys to stare at the gentry whom Mr. Keith made happy.

"To Lord Lavendale's, Bloomsbury Square,"

said Herrick; and then when they were seated side by side in the coach, he told Irene how Lavendale had insisted that they should lodge at his house till they had one of their own, and that they were to take as much time as ever they could in finding one.

"He has given me a suite of rooms, where we shall be as much alone as if we had a house all to ourselves," he said.

They found the rooms prepared for them, the servants in attendance, and an excellent breakfast of chicken and iced champagne on the table. Lavendale was discreetly absent. The butler told Mr. Durnford that his lordship was not expected home till the evening.

After breakfast, Durnford proposed that Irene should do a little shopping, and then it occurred to the bride for the first time that all her wardrobe was at Fairmile Court.

"And I am to cost you money at the very beginning!" she said dolefully.

"Dearest, it will be bliss to spend my money in such sweet service."

"Ah, but wait! I have twenty guineas in my

purse, which my father gave me a week ago, my quarterly allowance of pocket-money. That will buy all I shall want for the present; and I daresay he will let me have my clothes from Fairmile. However angry he may be, he will scarcely insist upon keeping my clothes."

"It would assuredly be a petty form of resentment. Well, dearest, may I go shopping with you? or would you rather go alone in a chair?"

"I would rather go with you."

"Then we'll just walk quietly into Holborn, as if we were an old married couple."

Irene put on her cloak and hood in front of a Venetian glass, while Herrick walked up and down the room and glanced somewhat uneasily from the windows, expecting the Squire's arrival.

They had breakfasted in a leisurely fashion, and it was now two o'clock. There had been ample time for Mr. Bosworth to go to Parson Keith, and having obtained his information from the parson, who knew the destination of the newly-married couple, to come on to Bloomsbury Square. Yet there was still no sign of pursuit. Nor did anything

occur all that afternoon to interrupt the serenity of the bride and bridegroom. They went together to the mercer's and to the milliner's, and Irene made her purchases on a very modest scale, and well within the limits of her pocket-money, while her husband discreetly waited at the door of the shop, and exercised a patience rare after the halcyon days of the honeymoon.

"How good you are to wait for me!" said Irene, as she rejoined him; "shopkeepers are so slow, and they pester one so to buy more than one wants."

"If you were like Mrs. Skerritt, who haunts every sale-room and bids for everything she sees, your catalogue of wants would not be completed half so easily," answered Herrick; "jealous though I am of your absence, I must own you have been vastly quick."

"But pray who is Mrs. Skerritt?" asked Irene. "Stay, she is the lady who was so kind to you. I should like to know her."

"Nay, love, I think it were better not, though there are great ladies who ask her to their houses,

and pretend to adore her—Lady Mary Montagu, for instance. But my young wife must choose her friends with the utmost discretion."

"I wish for no friends whom you do not care for," said his bride; "and now, Herrick, when am I to see the new comedy? It is hard that all the town should have admired my husband's play, while I know so little about it."

"Shall we go to Drury Lane this evening?"

"I should love to go."

"Then you shall. Lavendale has hired a box for the run of my play—he always does things in a princely style—and we can have it all to ourselves this evening. 'Twill be our first public appearance as man and wife, and all the town will guess we are married, and will envy me my prize."

They dined, or pretended to dine, at four, and then Lavendale's chariot drove them to Drury Lane.

What a delight it was for Irene to sit by her lover-husband's side, and watch and listen while the story of the play unfolded itself—to hear the audience laugh and applaud at each brisk retort, each humorous or fondly tender fancy! The play was

a story of love and lovers, the old, old story which has been telling itself ever since creation, and which yet seems ever new to the actors in it. There were wit and passion and freshness and manly spirit in Herrick's play, but there was not a single indecency; and the older school of wits and scribblers wondered exceedingly how so milk-and-waterish a comedy could take the town. Mrs. Manley, in a dark little box yonder, whispering behind her fan to a superannuated buck in a periwig that reached his knees, protested that the play was the tamest she had ever sat out.

"Tamer than *The Conscious Lovers*," she said, "though poor Dick lived in such fear of his wife that he dared never give free scope to his wit, lest Mrs. Molly should take offence at him. O, for the days of Etherege and Wycherley!"

"Nay, I protest," said the buck, adjusting a stray curl with his pocket-comb, and ogling the house with weak elderly eyes; "the play may be decent, but it is not tame. Those scenes between Nancy and Wilks are vastly fine. Stap my vitals if I have not been between laughing and crying all the even-

ing; and this is the seventh time I have seen the piece. I wonder who that pretty creature is in my Lord Lavendale's box, in a plain gray gown and a cherry-coloured hood? She is the finest woman—present company excepted—I have ogled for a decade."

"The gentleman sitting beside her is the author of the play," said Mrs. Manley, screwing up her eyes to peer across the width of the pit. "She is some vizard Miss that ought to be sitting in the slips, I'll be sworn."

"Nay, I'll take my oath she is a modest woman."

"But to sit alone in a box with a bachelor, and a notorious rake into the bargain—Lavendale's boon companion!"

"O, you are talking of the days before the deluge. Mr. Durnford has turned sober, and sits in Parliament. He is one of the doughtiest knights in Sir Robert's phalanx—a rising man, madam; and as for Lavendale, he too has turned sober. One hardly ever meets him at White's, or any of the other chocolate-houses. I am told he is dying."

"When he is dead you may tell me of his sobriety and I will believe you," retorted the blue-stocking, "but till then forgive me if I doubt your veracity or your information. It was only last June I saw Lavendale at Vauxhall intriguing with Lady Judith Topsparkle. I almost knocked against them in one of the dark walks, and a woman who saunters in a dark walk at midnight, hanging on the arm of a former lover—"

"Is in a fair way to forget her duty to a latter husband," asserted the buck, regaling himself with a pinch of smoked rappee out of the handle of his clouded cane.

Three or four of Durnford's acquaintance came to the box in the course of the evening, and were duly presented to his bride, whom they had all recognised as the beauty and heiress of Arlington Street, a star that had flashed upon the town for a brief space, to disappear into rustic obscurity.

"I feared, Mrs. Bosworth, that this poor little smoky town of ours was never again to be illumined by your beauty," said Mr. Philter, who was one of the first to press an entrance into the box.

"Mrs. Bosworth belongs only to history," said

Herrick; "I have the honour to present you to Mrs. Durnford."

"What, Herrick! you astound me. Can fortune have been so lavish, and can destiny have been so blind, when your obedient servant Thomas Philter still sighs and worships at the shrine of beauty a miserable bachelor?"

"I have heard you boast 'tis your own fault," laughed Herrick. "It is Philter who is wilful and reluctant, not Venus who is unkind."

"I grant that good easy lady has always been gracious," answered the scribbler gaily; "but how did you manage this business, Durnford? how reconcile a wealthy landed gentleman to the incongruity of a man of letters as a son-in-law?"

"Faith, Philter, since the incongruity seemed somewhat irreconcilable, we have taken the matter into our own hands. 'Twas Parson Keith who tied the knot, at ten o'clock this morning."

"The Reverend Alexander is the most useful man of the age, and this new Mayfair chapel is the true gate of Paradise," said Philter; and then with much flourish he congratulated Irene upon her marriage with his friend.

"Your father will come round, madam," he said. "They all do. They curse and rage and stamp and blaspheme for a time, are more furious than in a fit of podagra; but after a storm comes a calm, and the tyrant softens to the doating grandfather. No argument so potent as a son and heir to melt the heart of a wealthy landowner."

"I'm afraid, Philter, your impressions of the paternal character are mostly derived from the stage," said Durnford. "In a comedy the sternest parent is obliged to yield. No father's wrath can survive the fifth act. The curtain cannot come down till the lovers are forgiven. But in actual life I take it there is such a thing as an obstinate anger which lasts till the grave. However, we mean to soften Mr. Bosworth, if dutiful feeling and a proper sense of our own misconduct can soften him."

"Do you mean to tell him you repent, eh, you dog?" asked Philter.

"Not for the world would I utter such a lie. I glory in the rebellion which has gained me this dearest prize."

CHAPTER II.

"O, TO WHAT END, EXCEPT A JEALOUS ONE?"

THE married lovers were startled at their breakfast next morning by the arrival of Mdlle. Latour in a hackney chair. She had travelled up from Fairmile to the Hercules Pillars in Piccadilly by the heavy night coach, and had come from the inn in a chair. She looked worn and haggard with fatigue and anxiety.

"I knew where I should find my runaway," she said, clasping Irene in her arms, and covering her fair young face with tearful kisses. "I went first to Mr. Durnford's lodgings, where the woman told me he was staying at Lord Lavendale's house in Bloomsbury, and the same chair brought me here. O Irene, what a trick you have played us!"

"I loved him too well to give him up," faltered the girl. "If there had been any hope of winning

my father's consent I would have waited for it. But tell me, Maman, how does he take my disobedience? Is he dreadfully angry?"

"Alas, yes, *ma chérie*, his anger is indeed dreadful. I can conceive no kind of wrath more terrible. It is a silent anger. He sits alone in his room, or paces the corridors, and none of us dare approach him. Once he went into Mrs. Layburne's room, and was closeted with her for an hour; and then that awful calm broke in a tempest of angry words. Do not think that I listened at the door, Rena, in a prying spirit. I was in the hall, near enough to hear those furious tones, but not one word of speech. I could hear her voice, and it had a mocking sound. I believe in my heart, Rena, that the woman is a demoniac, and would glory in any misfortune of her master's. She has brooded over that house like an evil spirit, and the domestic quiet of our lives has been pain and grief to her. And now she flaps her wings like a bird of evil omen, and croaks out her rapture, and riots in your father's anguish."

"Why should he suffer anguish?" asked Irene. "I have married an honest man."

"Ah, but he had his own ambitious schemes for your marriage. You were to be a great lady, or you were at least to join wealth to wealth. Consider that he has given himself up so long to the labour of money-making that he has grown to think of money as the beginning and end of life. He will die with his mind full of 'Change Alley and the rise and fall of stocks."

"Then how could I help disappointing him—I who care so little for money?" pleaded Rena.

"And so Mrs. Layburne has been playing the devil," said Durnford. "Well, I am not surprised. I have heard some particulars of that lady's history from those who were familiar with her in her youth, early in Queen Anne's reign, and who remember her as a handsome fury, with the voice of an angel and the temper of a fiend. She sang in *Camilla* with Valentini, that first mongrel opera in which two or three of the principal performers sang in Italian and all the rest in English. It was just before Congreve and Vanbrugh opened their new theatre in the Haymarket. She was then in the heyday of her beauty. She is not so old a woman as you may think her. She

wore herself out untimely by the indulgence of an evil temper. But what of her health, Mademoiselle? Think you she is long for this world?"

"I believe that a few weeks will see that stormy nature at rest for ever."

"Then, Rena, the sooner we beard the lion—nay, I mean no disrespect to your father—the better for all of us. If Mademoiselle has no objection, we will take her back in our coach. I mean to start for Fairmile as soon as ever we can get a team of horses from the livery-yard."

"What, you will take Rena back to her father!"

"Only to justify my conduct and hers, and to obtain his forgiveness."

"What, in his present mood," exclaimed the little Frenchwoman, with a scared countenence, "before time has softened him, while his anger rages at white heat! You ought to wait at least a year. Let him begin to miss his daughter's presence; to yearn after her, to mourn for her as one who is dead; and then let her stand before him suddenly some day, rising like a ghost out of the grave of the past, and fall on

her knees at his feet. That will be the hour for pardon."

"I have a bolder card to play," said Durnford, "and I mean to play it. Mrs. Layburne is an element in my calculations; and I must have this business settled with the Squire while she is above ground."

"Better wait till she is dead and forgotten. Be assured she will never act the peacemaker. She will fan the flame of Mr. Bosworth's fury and goad him to vengeance. She hates my innocent Rena, hates every creature to whom the Squire was ever civil."

"Her very hatred may be made subservient to our interests. There is no use in arguing the matter, dear Mademoiselle. I mean to have an understanding with Mr. Bosworth, and I think I shall succeed in convincing him that he has very little right to be angry."

"You are an obstinate young man," said Mademoiselle, with a shrug which expressed a kind of despairing resignation.

"Did my father send in pursuit of me?" asked Rena.

"Not he. When we told him you were missing —'twas I had to do it, I, who had been appointed by him as your guardian, and who had kept so bad a watch—he grew white with anger, and for some moments was speechless. Then he said in a strange voice, which he tried to make calm and steady, 'She has run off with her penniless lover, I make no doubt. So be it. She may starve with him, beg, thieve, die on the gallows with him, for all I care.' I tell you this, Mr. Durnford, to show you the kind of temper he is in, and how unwise it were to make your supplication to him at such a time."

"And he gave no orders for pursuit, made no offer of going after us in person?" asked Durnford, ignoring the lady's advice.

"Not once did he suggest such a thing. 'She has gone out of my house like an ingrate,' he said; 'I have done with her.' That was all. It was at breakfast-time we missed you, and I went to him straight with the news. About an hour later there came a man who had seen a coach-and-four waiting by the wicket-gate, and that seemed conclusive evi-

dence to Mr. Bosworth. He had no further doubt as to what had happened."

Durnford rang, and requested that a messenger should be sent to the livery-yard to order a coach-and-four. And then he pressed Mademoiselle to refresh herself at the breakfast-table, which was somewhat luxuriously provided. The servants brought a fresh chocolate-pot and a dish of rolls for the new-comer, and although Mademoiselle was too agitated to have any appetite, her quondam pupil hung about her affectionately, and insisted upon her taking a good breakfast.

"And so this fine house belongs to Lord Lavendale," said the little Frenchwoman. "Are you to live here always?"

"Nay, Mademoiselle, do not think so meanly of me as to suppose I would be content to lodge my wife in another man's house, even if I were satisfied to live at free quarters as a bachelor, which I was not. No, to oblige Lavendale, who was very pressing, I accepted the use of this fine house for my honeymoon. It is a kind of enchanted palace in which we are to begin the fairy tale of married life; but so soon

as we sober down a little, Rena and I mean to find a home of our own. We shall look for some rustic cottage in one of the villages near London, Chelsea or Battersea, most likely—for I must not be far from the House—and we shall begin domestic life in an unpretending manner. We will not take a fine house, as poor Steele did, and call it a hovel, and be over head and ears in debt, and our furniture pledged to a good-natured friend. No, we will live from hand to mouth if needs must, but we will pay our way. I have a trifle put by, and I count upon my comedy for giving me the money to furnish our nest."

"And if the Squire should turn me out of doors, as I reckon he will in a day or so, may I come and be your housekeeper?" asked Mademoiselle. "I should save you a servant, for I can cook as well as teach, and I would do all your housework into the bargain, for the sake of being near Rena. I have saved a little money, so I should not be any expense to you; and I would have my little room apart, like Mrs. Layburne, so as not to disturb your *tête-à-tête* life as married lovers."

"Dearest Maman, I should love to have you with us, but not to work for us. That would never do, would it, Herrick?"

"No, indeed, love. And though we are not rich, we shall be able to afford some stout serving-wench. But if Mademoiselle would keep house for us, go to market occasionally, and toss an omelette or mix a salad now and then, just to show our silly British drudge how such things should be done—"

"I will do all that, and more. I love the cares of the *ménage*."

After this came much hugging and kissing between governess and pupil, and then a footman announced that the coach was at the door, and they all three started for Fairmile.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when the four horses, a fresh relay from Kingston, drew up in front of the Squire's door. It had not entered into his mind that his runaway daughter could be so brazen as to come back to the house she had deserted yet awhile, so he issued no orders for her exclusion. She and her husband walked into the

house boldly, to the alarm of the old butler, and were ushered straight to the small parlour, the Squire's den, where he sat in a dejected attitude beside a desk strewn and heaped with papers. Uppermost among them was a document in several folios, tied together with green ferret, which looked suspiciously like a will.

He started at his daughter's entrance, lifted his heavy head, and glared at her with angry eyes under scowling brows.

"What, madam, do you dare to intrude upon the solitude of the parent you have outraged?" and then recognising Durnford close at his wife's elbow, "and to bring your pauper-husband at your tail? *That* is an insolence which you will both repent. Leave my house this instant, fellow, or I will have you kicked out of it by my servants."

"I doubt if there is one of them strong enough for the office," said Herrick; "do not vent your spleen upon me, Mr. Bosworth, till you have heard what I have to say in my own defence. That I am here to-day must show you that I mean honestly."

"Honestly, sir! there is no such thing as

honesty in a man who steals an heiress. You have secured your prize, I take it. You have bound her fast in matrimony."

"Yes, sir, we are bound to each other for life. We were married at the chapel in Curzon Street at ten o'clock yesterday morning."

"What, by the Reverend Couple-Beggars, by that scurvy dealer in marriage-lines, Parson Keith? A highly respectable marriage, altogether worthy of a landed gentleman's daughter and heiress—a marriage to be proud of. Leave my house, woman! You and I have nothing more to do with each other."

"Father," she pleaded, sinking on her knee at his feet, where he sat scowling at her, not having stirred from his brooding attitude since her entrance; "father, can you be so cruel to me for having married the man of my choice? As to your fortune, with all hope of being rich in days to come, I resign it without a sigh. What I saw of wealth and splendour, pleasure and fashion, last winter, only served to show me how false and hollow such things are, and how one's heart may ache in the midst of them. I can be happy with the man I love in humble cir-

cumstances, or can rejoice in his good fortune if ever he should grow rich: but I cannot be happy without your forgiveness."

"Then you may perish in your sorrow, for I can never forgive. You had best drop sentiment, wench; blot me out of your life, as I have blotted you out of mine. You have had your own way. You had a father, you have a husband; be content to think you have profited by the exchange."

"Why are you so angry?" she asked piteously.

"Why?" he echoed, "why?" and then bringing his clenched fist down upon the document of many folios, "because I had built all my hopes on you—because I had speculated and hoarded, and calculated and thought, in order to amass a mighty fortune for you and your heirs. I would have made you a Duchess, girl. Yes, by Heaven, I had negotiations in hand with a ducal house, and you would have been taken to town a few weeks hence to be courted by the heir to a dukedom. I should have lived to see my daughter mistress of half a dozen palaces—"

"Not your daughter, sir," said Herrick gravely; "your daughter has long been mistress of one

narrow house—a tenement which none would care to dispute with her."

"What are you raving about, fellow?"

The Squire started to his feet, and looked at Durnford in a kind of savage bewilderment.

"I am here to reveal the trick that has been played upon you, sir, and to justify myself as a man of honour," answered Herrick. "I stole no heiress when I took this dear girl from beneath your roof. I counselled no disobedience to a father when I urged her to fly with me. I speculated upon no future fortune, hoped nothing from your relenting bounty. The girl I loved was a nameless waif who for thirteen years has been imposed upon you as a daughter, and who loves you and reverences you as truly as if she were indeed your child."

"Not my daughter?" muttered the Squire; "not my daughter? It is a foul lie—a lie hatched by you, sir, to cozen and torment me—an outrageous, obvious, shallow, impudent lie!"

"Should I invent a lie which deprives my wife of any claim to your wealth? However indifferent I may be to riches, I am too much a man

of the world to so wantonly sacrifice my wife's prospects."

"Upon what grounds?" cried Bosworth. "What proof?" And then suddenly gripping Irene by the arm, "Unfasten your bodice, girl. Let me see your right shoulder."

He almost tore the upper part of the bodice from the fair and dimpled shoulder in his furious impatience, and there at the top of the arm was revealed a deep cicatrice, the scar of a wound healed long ago.

"Out of my sight, you beggar's brat!" he cried huskily. "Yes, I have been tricked, deluded, cozened damnably. But by whom? There could be only two concerned in it. Bridget and that other one—that she-devil. Follow me, both of you. We'll have it out! We'll have it out!"

He dashed out of the room and along the corridor with the rapid movements of a madman, and they followed him to Mrs. Layburne's room.

She who had once been the delight of crowded playhouses, the admired of bucks and wits in the days of the Godolphin ministry, now presented the saddest spectacle of hopeless decay.

She lay on a sofa beside a pinched and poverty-stricken fire, burning dully in one of those iron grates by means of which our forefathers contrived to keep themselves cold while they were mocked by the semblance and abstract idea of heat. A small table with a basin that had held broth, and two or three medicine bottles, stood near her. Her gaunt and wasted form was clad in a dingy printed calico dressing-gown, over which her white hair fell in neglect and abandonment. Her eyes — once the stars of a playhouse—now looked unnaturally large in her pinched and shrunken countenance—unnaturally bright, too, with the lustre of disease; while on each hollow cheek there burned a hectic spot, which made the sickly pallor of the skin only the more livid by contrast.

She looked up with a startled air when the Squire burst into her room, followed immediately by Herrick and Irene. She struggled into a sitting position, and sat trembling, either with the effort of shifting her attitude, or with the agitation caused by this strange intrusion.

"Do you see this girl?" demanded Bosworth,

thrusting Irene in front of him. "Do you see her, woman?"

"Ay, sir, I see her well enough. My sight is not yet so dim but I can recognise a familiar face."

"Who and what is she?"

"Your daughter; your disobedient rebellious daughter, whom you were howling about yesterday, and whom you welcome home to-day."

"She is not my daughter, and you know it. She is a pauper's nameless brat, foisted upon me by you, by you, she-devil, so that you might be able to twit and laugh at me, to revel in the sight of my discomfiture, before you sink into the grave. *This* was your vengeance upon me, was it — your vengeance upon me for not having been more your victim than I was, though God knows I paid dear enough for my folly! *This* is what your innuendoes and mysterious speeches of yesterday hinted at, though I was too dull to understand them."

"What makes you think she is less than your daughter?" asked Mrs. Layburne, with a mocking smile, a smile that seemed to gloat over the Squire's agony of rage.

"What?—this," pointing to the naked shoulder, from which kerchief and bodice had been so rudely wrenched away. "This scar, which *you* pointed out to me when first this beggar-brat was brought into my house. 'You may always know her by that mark,' you said: ''twill last her lifetime.' And I forgot all about the mark, and loved the impostor that was foisted upon me, and believed in her, and toiled for her, and schemed for her as my very daughter. It flashed upon me all at once — the memory of that scar, and your words and voice as you showed it—just now, when her husband yonder told me what his wife is; and I knew in a moment that I had been duped. Why did you do this thing, Barbara?"

"Why? To be even with you, as I told you I would be—ay, swore it by my mother's grave, when you forsook me to marry a fine lady. I told you I would have my revenge, and I have lived to enjoy it. Mr. Durnford has only anticipated my confession. I should have told you everything upon my death-bed. I have feasted upon the bare thought of that parting hour, when you should learn how your discarded mistress had tricked you."

"Devil!" muttered Bosworth. "What had you to gain by such an infamy?"

"Everything! Revenge! 'the most luscious morsel that the devil puts into the sinner's mouth.' That is what the Preacher says of it. I have tasted that sweet morsel, chewed and mumbled it many a time by anticipation, as I have sat by this desolate hearth. It has been sweeter to me than the applause of the playhouse, the lights, the music, the flattery, the jewels, and savoury suppers, and wines, and rioting. I have watched your growing love for another man's child, while your own, your *wife's* child, lay mouldering in her grave. I have seen you gloating over your schemes for a spurious daughter's aggrandisement—heard you praise her beauty and boast of her likeness to your ancestors. Poor fool, poor fool! To think that a man of the world, a speculator of 'Change Alley, could be so easily hoodwinked!"

"When was the change made?" asked Bosworth, ringing the bell furiously. "Bridget must have been concerned in it. I will prosecute you both for felony."

"Prosecute a dying woman! fie for shame, Squire! Where is your humanity?"

"I would drag you from your death-bed to a gaol if the law would let me. Whatever I can do I will; be sure of that, Jezebel."

"Is it come to Jezebel? I was your Helen once, your Cleopatra, the sovereign beauty of the world."

"Ay, 'tis a quick transmutation which such cattle as you make—from your dupe's brief vision of beauty and love to the hag that will turn and rend him. Where is Bridget?" (to the servant who answered the bell;) "bring her to me this instant."

"I think I had best take my wife from the reach of your violence, sir, now that I have convinced you that I did you no wrong in marrying her," said Durnford, with his arm round Irene, as if to shelter her in this moral tempest, this confusion and upheaval of all the baser elements in human nature.

"Take her away. Yes, remove her from my sight at once and for ever. Let me forget how I have loved her, that I may less deeply loathe her."

"Father," cried Irene piteously, holding out her

arms to him, "do not forget that you have loved me, and that I have returned your love measure for measure. Is there no tie but that of blood? I have been brought up under your roof, and you have been kind to me, and I am sure I love you as much as daughters love their fathers. If you scorn me, do not scorn my love."

"You poor beggar's brat," muttered the Squire contemptuously, yet with a relenting look at the pale pathetic face, "you are the lightest sinner of them all, perhaps. But to have been cheated—to have taken a vagabond's spawn to my breast—"

"She is no vagabond's child, but of as gentle blood on the father's side as your own. She comes of a good old Hampshire family—as old as William the Norman. Her father was Philip Chumleigh, the son of a younger son, a gentleman born and bred."

"I thought as much when I saw him dead and stark upon Flamestead Common," said the Squire. "So-ho, mistress," to Bridget, who came in with a cowed air, and guilt written in every feature; "you were in the conspiracy to cheat your master with a

supposititious child; but I'd have you to know that you were accomplice in a felony, for which you shall swing higher than Jack Sheppard, if there's justice in this land."

"O sir, is it hanging?" exclaimed the nurse, "and I as innocent as the unborn babe. Never would such a thought have come into my head, to put another into my darling's place; but she made me do it, and I was half distracted—loving them both so well—so full of sorrow for the little angel that was gone, and of tenderness for her that was left, and she — Mrs. Layburne — threatened me she would say 'twas by my neglect my precious treasure died, though God knows I neglected nothing, and watched day and night. But I was scarcely in my right senses; so I gave way, and held my tongue, and once done it was done for ever—there was no going back upon it. And when I saw your honour so fond of my pretty one, and she growing nearer and dearer to you every day, I thought it was well as it was. You had something to love."

"Something, but not of my own blood—something that had no right to my affection, an impostor,

an alien, a sham, a cheat, a mockery. You had better have poisoned me, woman. It would have been a kinder thing to do."

"It was her doing," sobbed Bridget, pointing to Mrs. Layburne, who listened and looked on with a ghastly smile, the exultation of a fiend doomed to everlasting torment, and rejoicing in the agony of another. "'Twas all her doing, and I knew it was a sin, and have been troubled with the thought of it ever since; yes, I have never known real peace and comfort since I did her bidding. But she told me 'twas a good thing to do; your heart was so set on the child that it would all but kill you to lose her, and one child was equal to another in the sight of God, and the one that was left would grow up to be a blessing to you, did you but think she was your daughter; and so I yielded, and let her lie to you. But, O sir, as you are a Christian, do not punish that innocent lamb for our sin. Do not take your love from her."

"It is gone," cried the Squire. "She has become hateful to me."

"She shall trouble you no more, sir," said Irene,

with a quiet dignity, which moved her husband almost to tears. "I am very sorry that you should have been cheated, but you must at least own that I have been an innocent impostor. You have been very good to me, sir, and I have loved you as a father should be loved, and though you may hate me, my heart cannot turn so quickly. It cleaves to you still, sir. Good-bye."

She dropped on her knee again and kissed his reluctant hand, then put her hand in her husband's, and glided from the room with him, Mdlle. Latour following.

"We had best go back to London in the coach that brought us," said Herrick. "Will you come with us, Mademoiselle, or will you follow us later ?"

"I will follow in a day or two," answered the little Frenchwoman. "It would seem like sneaking away to go to-day. I will wait till the tempest is lulled. I am really sorry for that poor man, savage as he is in his chagrin and disappointment; I will see the end of it. That woman is a devil."

"Can you forgive me, Rena, for having sprung

this surprise upon you?" asked Herrick, drawing his young wife to his breast, and kissing away her tears. "Or do I seem to have been cruel? I feared your courage might fail if I told you what was coming: and I wanted to have you face to face with your sham father and that wicked witch yonder. I was prepared for her denial of the facts."

"How did you make this discovery, Herrick?"

"That is a long story, dearest. You shall know all about it by and by. And now, dear love, you are my very own. No tyrannical father can come between my orphan wife and me. We stand each alone, love, and all in all to each other."

"I am content to be yours and yours only," she said, looking up at him with adoring eyes. "But I hope my—I hope Mr. Bosworth will forgive me some day."

"Be sure he will, my pet, and that he loves you dearly at this moment, though he roars and blusters about hatred. All will come well, dearest, in the end."

"And you have married a pauper, after all," said Irene.

"I have married the girl I love, and that is enough for me," answered Herrick. "But it is not so clear to me but that I have married a fortune into the bargain. Wait and see, love; the end has not come yet. And now settle your hood and wrap your cloak round you, and we are off again for London."

And thus, clinging to her husband's arm, she who had so long been called Irene Bosworth left the home that had seemed her birthplace. It had been a solitary joyless life which she had lived there, for the most part, yet she looked back at the old panelled hall with a sigh of regret, the instinctive yearning of an affectionate nature.

"We are as unfettered as our first parents, Irene, and the world is before us," said Herrick gaily, as he lifted her into the coach. "Back to Kingston, my men," to the postillions. "We will stay at the inn there to-night, and go on to London to-morrow morning."

"Go," said the Squire to Bridget, when the door had closed upon his sometime daughter; "go about

your business, woman, and consider yourself lucky if I do not send you to gaol."

"You had better think twice of that, Squire," said Mrs. Layburne. "To have this business out before a magistrate might lead to the asking of strange questions."

"Do you think *I* care what questions they ask?" cried Bosworth scornfully. "Do you suppose I am such an arrant cur as to quail before my fellow-worms because I have lived my own life, crawled upon this earth after my *own* fashion, and not wriggled in *their* particular mode? No, Barbara Layburne, if I have been a profligate, I have at least been a bold sinner, and I have never feared the face of a man. Were not the grip of death upon you, madam, *you* should answer to the law for the trick you have played me."

"What if it was an accident?" asked Barbara; "both the children were so reduced by sickness out of their own likeness, that one might easily mistake one for another."

"*You* could not. 'Twas you called my attention to the scar upon the baby's arm when she was but an hour in this house."

"Ay, I remember. I bade you mark it well. I had it in my mind even then to ring the changes on you—to cheat you out of a daughter—you who had cheated me out of name and honour, the world's respect, and a good husband—for I might have made a good match, were it not that I was a slave to my passion for you. When I came into this house and met only scorn and ignominy, I resolved to be quits with you. I have lain awake many a night trying to hit upon the way; but the devil himself would not help me to a plan till you brought that beggar's brat into the house. Then in a moment I saw the chance of being even with you. I knew how you prided yourself on your ancient race, how you heaped up riches, caring not as other men care for the things that gold can buy: only caring for wealth as misers care for it, to heap money-bags upon money-bags. I knew you had made your schme of leaving a vast fortune, as Marlborough did t'other day, marrying your child to a great nobleman, leaving your name among the mighty ones of the land. I knew this, for though you were rarely civil to me, you could not help confiding in me; 'twas an old habit that

remained to you from the days when we were lovers. I knew this, and I meant to drag your pride in the dust; and so, as the whole scheme flashed upon me, I bade you note the cicatrice on the baby's arm, so that when my hour came you should see the sign-manual of the lie that had been foisted on you. Your son-in-law has anticipated me by a short time —that is all. My play is played out."

"You are a devil!" muttered Bosworth, walking towards the door.

"I am as God made me—a woman who could love, and who can hate."

CHAPTER III.

"AND ALL YOUR HONOUR IN A WHISPER LOST."

THE great house in Soho Square was alive with movement and light, the going and coming of guests, the setting down of chairs and squabbles of coachmen and running footmen, the flare of torches in the autumn dusk. The Topsparkles were in town again, everybody of importance had come to town, to be present at the coronation, from old Duchess Sarah and her bouquet of Duchess daughters, and her wild grandsons and lovely granddaughters, and the mad Duchess of Buckingham, and Mary Wortley Montagu, otherwise Moll Worthless, and the wits and beaux and Italian singers—all the little great world of brilliant personalities, card-playing, dicing, intriguing, dancing, masquerading, duelling, running away with other men's wives or beating their own. The wild whirlpool of town life was at its highest

point of ebullition, all the wheels were going madly round, and the devil and his imps had their hands full of mischief and iniquity.

It was the first winter season of the new reign. Caroline was triumphant in her assurance of a well-filled purse; in her security of dominion over a dull, dogged, self-willed little husband, who was never more her slave than when he affected to act and think for himself; happy too in the knowledge that she had two of the cleverest men in England for her prime minister and her chamberlain; scornfully tolerant of a rival who helped her to bear the burden of her husband's society; indulgent to all the world, and proud of being admired and loved by the cleverest men in her dominions. King George was happy also after his sober fashion, oscillating between St. James's and Richmond, with a secret hankering for Hanover, hating his eldest son, and with no passionate attachment to any other member of his numerous progeny. Amidst the brilliant Court circle there were few ladies whom the Queen favoured above Judith Topsparkle. She had even condescended so far as to wear the famous Topsparkle

diamonds at her coronation; for of all Queen Anne's jewels but a pearl necklace or so descended to Queen Caroline, and it was generally supposed that his late Majesty had ransacked the royal jewel-caskets for gems to adorn his German mistresses, the fat and the lean; while perchance his later English sultana, bold Miss Brett, may have decked her handsome person with a few of those kingly treasures. At any rate, there was but little left to adorn Queen Caroline, who was fain to blaze on her coronation-day with a borrowed lustre.

It was November; the Houses were sitting, and Lavendale, after a period of complete seclusion and social extinguishment, had startled the town in a new character, as politician and orator. Perchance his friend's success in the Lower House may have stimulated his ambition, or his appearance in the senate may have been a whim of the moment in one whose actions had been too often governed by whim; but whatever the motive, Lord Lavendale startled the peers by one of the finest speeches that had been made in that august assembly for some time; and the House of Lords in the dawn of the Hanoverian

dynasty was an assembly which exercised a far more potent influence for good or evil than the Upper House of that triply reformed Parliament which we boast of to-day.

People talked about Lord Lavendale's speech for at least a fortnight. It was not so much that the oration itself had been really fine and had vividly impressed those who heard it, but it was rather that such dignified opposition, such grave invective, and sound logic came from a survivor of the Mohawk and of the Calf's Head Clubs, a notorious rake and reveller, a man whose name five years ago had been a synonym for modish profligacy. It was as when Lucius Junius Brutus startled the Roman Forum; it was as when Falstaff's boon companion, wild Prince Hal, flung off his boyish follies and stood forth in all his dignity as the warrior king; it was a transformation that set all the town wondering; and Lavendale, who had plunged again into the whirlpool of society, found himself the fashion of the hour, a man with a new reputation.

Yes, he had gone back to the bustling crowded stage of Court life: he had emerged from the hermit-

like seclusion of laboratory and library, from the wild walks and woodland beauties of Lavendale Manor. He was of the town again, and seemed as eager for pleasure as the youngest and gayest of the bloods and beaux of Leicester Fields and St. James's. He attended half a dozen assemblies of an evening, looked in nightly at opera or playhouse, gambled at White's, talked at Button's, dawdled away an occasional morning at Dick's, reading the newest pamphlet for or against the Government. He was seen everywhere.

"Lavendale has been in Medea's cauldron," said Captain Asterley. "He looks ten years younger than when I saw him last summer."

"I believe the man is possessed," replied Lady Polwhele; "he has an almost infernal gaiety. There is a malignant air about him that is altogether new. He used to be a good-natured rake, who said malicious things out of pure light-heartedness; but now there is a lurking devilry in every word he utters."

"He is only imitating the mad Irish parson," said Asterley. "Your most fashionable wit, nowa-

days, is a mixture of dirt and malignity such as the Dean affects. Everybody tries to talk and write like Cadenus, since it has been discovered that to be half a savage and more than half a beast is the shortest road to a woman's favour."

"I believe all you men are jealous of the Dean," retorted her ladyship, "and that is why his influential friends have conspired to keep him on the other side of the Irish Channel. He is a fine personable man, and if he has his savage gloomy moods, be sure he has his melting moments, or that poor Miss Vanhomrigh would not have made such a fool of herself. I saw her once at an auction, and thought her more than passable, and with the manners of a lady."

There had been no more spurts of jealousy on the part of Mr. Topsparkle. His wife and he had lived on the most courteous terms since last midsummer. Lavendale's disappearance from the scene had appeased the husband's anger. He concluded that his remonstrances had been taken in good part, and that Lady Judith had dismissed her flirt. That

Lavendale had been anything more than her flirt Mr. Topsparkle did not believe; but from flirt to lover is but a swift transition, and there had assuredly been an hour of peril.

Mr. Topsparkle also had a rejuvenised air when he came up to town and made his reappearance in distinguished circles; but what in Lavendale was a caprice of nature, an erratic flash and sparkle of brilliancy in a waning light, was in Topsparkle the result of premeditated care and the highest development of restorative art. He had vegetated for the last three months at Ringwood Abbey, leaving his wife to do all the hard work of entertaining visitors, and sleeping through the greater portion of his existence; and now he reappeared in London full of energy and vivacity, and with an air of superiority to most of the younger men, who were content to show themselves in their true colours as exhausted debauchees, men who had drained the cup of sensual pleasure to the dregs, and whose jaded intellects were too feeble to originate any new departure in vicious amusements.

Though in society Mr. Topsparkle affected to be

only the connoisseur, dilettante, and man of fashion, there was a leaven of hard-hearted commercial sagacity in his mind, an hereditary strain which marked his affinity to the trading classes. Keen though he was as a collector of pictures and curios, he was still keener as a speculator on 'Change, and knew every turn in the market, every trick of the hour.

He loved London because it brought him nearer to the money market, brought him, as it were, face to face with his millions, which were for the most part invested in public securities, Alderman Topsparkle having had no passion for adding field to field at two and a half per cent per annum. The alderman put out his wealth safely, in the New River Company and in the best National securities.

Vyvyan Topsparkle had done nothing to hazard those solid investments or to jeopardise his hereditary income; but he liked to trifle with the surplus thousands which accumulated at his banker's, and which even Judith's extravagance could not exhaust; he liked to sail his light bark over the billows of speculation, fanned by the summer winds of chance

and change, and glorying in his skill as a navigator. Ombre and quadrille had very little excitement for him, but he loved to watch the fluctuations of a speculative stock, and to sell out at the critical moment when a bubble was on the point of bursting. He had been either wonderfully clever or wonderfully lucky; for he had contrived with but few exceptions to emerge from every risky enterprise with a profit. Such trivial speculations were but playing with money, and made no tangible impression upon the bulk of his wealth: but as the miser loves to hoard his guineas in a chest under his bed and to handle and toy with them, so Mr. Topsparkle loved to play at speculation, and to warm the dull blood of age with the fever of the money market.

He was sitting before a boule bureau, with three rows of pigeon-holes stuffed with papers in front of him, and a litter of papers on his desk, when Fétis entered, carrying his master's periwig. The room was spacious, half dressing-room and half study, with panelled walls richly adorned with old Italian pottery, and a fireplace in an angle of the room, with a mantelpiece carried up to the ceiling by narrow

shelves and quaint divisions, all filled with curios; delf and china, India monsters, Dutch teapots, German chocolate-pots, jars, and tea-cups. In one window stood the toilet-table, a veritable laboratory, before which Mr. Topsparkle sat for an hour every morning while his complexion was composed for the day. In the corner opposite the fireplace was the triangular closet in which Mr. Topsparkle's full-bottomed wig was besprinkled with maréchale powder. The atmosphere of the room was loaded with various perfumes, including a faint suggestion of burnt rappee, a kind of snuff which had been fashionable ever since a fire at a famous tobacconist's, which had thrown a large quantity of scorched snuff upon the market, and had given the bucks a new sensation and a new taste.

Fétis put the wig on a stand near the dressing-table, adjusted the feathery curls carefully with delicate finger-tips, fell a step or two back to contemplate his work, gazing at it dreamily as at the perfection of beauty, suggesting the august countenance of its wearer, who was looking over a sheaf of documents and seemed preoccupied.

His valet watched him deferentially for some minutes, and then coughed gently as if to attract attention.

Topsparkle looked up suddenly. He had not heard the cautious opening of the door or the velvet tread of his slave.

"Your wig is quite ready, sir."

"I am not ready for it yet."

"Could I speak with you, sir, for a minute?"

"Of course, you can always speak with me. What do you want?"

Mr. Topsparkle laid down his papers, and faced about as he asked the question.

"I am sorry to say, sir, that fortune has been against me since I came back to London. I have lost heavily at basset, and I am in sore need of money."

"Again!" exclaimed Topsparkle impatiently; "you are everlastingly a loser. What right has a fellow of your quality to gamble? Dice and cards are a diversion for gentlemen, sir."

"Fellows of my quality are human, sir, and have minds that are subject to temptation and example.

We can but imitate our betters. As for cards and dice, I am drawn into play by gentlemen who come to my house and are gracious enough to invite my company."

"They should know their position better than to associate with a lodging-house keeper."

"O sir, these are gentlemen of rank; dukes, marquises, earls, who have no fear of derogating by low company. They stand secure in a nobility three and four centuries old. My society cannot degrade *them*."

"How much do you want?" asked Topsparkle, with suppressed rage.

He took some papers out of the pigeon-hole labelled F, and turned them over with a hand that shook a little, till he came to one which he drew out and unfolded. It was a list of figures, headed by the name of Fétis, and against each amount there was a date.

"If you would oblige me with a paltry thousand, sir, I could set myself right. I have the honour to owe seven hundred and fifty to his grace the Duke of Bolton."

"A thousand pounds! Egregious insolence. Do you know that you had three thousand, in sums of five hundred, from me last winter? Four thousand a year! Was ever valet paid such wages since the world began?"

"Nay, sir, it is not every valet who has the honour to serve a gentleman in whose exorbitant income thousands count as hundreds do with meaner men. Nor do I rank with the common herd of servants; I have been your secretary and your confidant, often your nurse, and sometimes even your physician. I have prescribed for you in some of the most difficult occasions of your life—and successfully. I have made an end of your trouble."

"You are a villain," said Topsparkle, sitting in a brooding attitude, staring at the carpet.

"I do not pretend—never have pretended—to be a saint. A man of rigid principles would not have served you as I have done. I have been useful to your loves and to your antipathies. I do not expect to be paid as a common servant. I have a claim upon your fortune inferior to none."

"O, you are a vastly clever person, and no doubt

think you have been useful to me. Well, I will advance this money—mind, as I advanced the last, on your note of hand. It must be a loan."

"I have no objection, sir."

There had been many such transactions. Fétis thought that this loan theory was a salve to his employer's wounded pride. He would not suppose himself completely under the influence of his servant. He would assert an independent position, play the patron, hug himself with the idea of power over his slave.

"He would never dare to sue me for the money," Fétis told himself. "It can be no more than an empty form."

And with this sense of security Fétis signed anything that was offered to him for signature. He had lived a good many years in London, but was still a thorough Frenchman in his profound ignorance of English law, and he had, moreover, a somewhat exaggerated estimate of his influence over his master. He had never yet failed in his attacks upon Mr. Topsparkle's purse, and he thought his resources in that direction were almost unlimited. This had encour-

aged him in extravagance, and had fostered the habit of reckless gaming, which was the open vice of the age.

"You ought to be making a fortune, not losing one, Fétis, with such a house as yours," said Topsparkle, counting over a bundle of bank-notes after the note of hand had been duly executed. "I am told that the most fashionable men in town patronise your supper-room, and build their occasional nests upon your upper floors, where you have bachelor quarters, as I understand, for gentlemen who are in town for too short a season to disturb the desolation of their family mansions."

"The business is not unprofitable," replied Fétis deprecatingly, "and my patrons are among the flower of the aristocracy. But I have an expensive wife."

"What can we expect, my good fellow, when at our age we marry reigning beauties," asked Topsparkle lightly. "Your lady was a dancer at the Opera House, as I am told, and a toast among the bloods who frequent the green-room. Did you think she would transform herself into a Dutch housewife,

tuck up her sleeves and peel vegetables in the kitchen, because you chose to marry her?"

"Unhappily she has caught the infection of that accursed house, and plays as deep as a lady of fashion," said Fétis ruefully.

"My good Fétis, a young woman must have some kind of diversion. If she does not gamble, she will play you a worse turn. See how indulgent I am to her ladyship on that score. 'Tis only when her losses become outrageous that I venture a gentle remonstrance. And so your pretty little French wife has learnt the trick of the town, and dreams of spadillo and codille, like a woman of fashion. By the way, I hear Lord Lavendale is in London again. Pray does he ever use your house?"

"No, sir, I have never seen him there. He is not in my set."

"And yet I take it your set is a wild one, and likely to suit his lordship."

"Nay, sir, they tell me Lavendale has sobered down since his return from the Continent, and neither drinks nor plays as deep as he did before he went abroad."

"Is it so? Well, he is a mighty pretty fellow, and a prime favourite with the women. Some one told me the other day that he was in a consumption. You may begin to dress my head. Is that true, d'ye think?"

"The consumption, sir. Nay, I fancy 'tis an idle story got up by his lordship to make him more interesting to the sex. Women love a man who is reported to be dying. I have known men whose lives have been despaired of for ten years at a stretch, and who have wound up by marrying fortunes, having very little but their bad health to recommend them. A fellow who has no other capital may marry a rich widow on the strength of a consumption or a heart complaint."

"I am told Lord Lavendale is looking younger and handsomer than ever," pursued Topsparkle; "but I thought it might be the hectic of disease which imparted a delusive beauty."

"I doubt, sir, the fellow is well enough, and will outlive us all," said Fétis, with a malicious pleasure in blighting his master's hopes.

He finished his work of art upon Topsparkle's

countenance, putting in every minute touch as carefully as a miniature painter. He fitted the stately wig upon the bald pate, and then Mr. Topsparkle put his head into the powdering closet for the last sprinkle of maréchale, and emerged therefrom in all the perfection of artificial grace and court fashion. His coat and waistcoat were marvels of the tailor's and embroideress's art; his cravat was a miracle of Roman point worked by Ursuline nuns in a convent amidst the Apennines; his diamond shoe-buckles were of an exquisite neatness and elegance; his red-heeled shoes set off to perfection the narrow foot and arched instep.

The delicate duties of this elaborate toilet completed, Fétis was free till the evening. Mr. Topsparkle had meaner hirelings who attended to his lesser wants and waited upon him all day long. Fétis was the artist in chief, the high-priest in the temple, and his ministrations were confined to the sacred and secret hours in which youth and good looks were elaborated from age and decay.

To-day Fétis was inwardly impatient to be gone, yet was far too well bred to betray his impatience by

the faintest indication. He seemed rather to linger, as if loth to depart, arranged the gold and ivory fittings of the *nécessaire* with nicest care, gave a finishing touch to patch and pulvilio boxes, perfume bottles, and tortoiseshell combs, and it was only when Mr. Topsparkle dismissed him that he gave a sliding bow and glided gracefully from the room, as elegant in every detail of his costume as his master, but with the subdued and sober colouring which implied gravity of manners and humility of station.

When he was gone, Mr. Topsparkle rose from the sofa where he had been reclining in an attitude of luxurious repose, and began to pace the room, full of thought.

"I don't like the rascal's manner," he said to himself. "He is too bold, presumes too much upon his usefulness in the present, and"—after a thoughtful pause—"in the past. He has become a horse leech, bleeds me of thousands with an insufferable audacity. Yet, after all, 'tis hardly worth troubling about. The mere amount in itself is scarce worth a thought to a man of my means, though I might endow a bishopric on a less income, and get some

credit for my generosity. To maintain a profligate and gamester, a pander to fashionable follies, only because he has the art of laying on a cosmetic and pencilling an eyebrow to a higher degree than any-one else! Yet after all 'tis something to have one's toilet performed skilfully, and a blunderer would put me in a fever every time he touched me. Why should I grudge the fellow his wages? he is as necessary to me as Dubois was to the Duke, and *he* would accept no lesser recompense than to be prime minister, and have all the threads of state intrigue in his hands. This fellow of mine is an unambitious, innocuous scoundrel. He only preys upon my purse."

He rang for his footman, one of those splendid functionaries being always in attendance in a three-cornered lobby or ante-room outside Mr. Topsparkle's study. This chamber was an oak-panelled well, lighted from a skylight, cold in winter and suffocating in summer; but the lacquey, sitting on a velvet-covered bench with his silken legs stretched out before him, was supposed to enjoy a life of luxurious idleness.

"My chocolate and the papers," ordered Mr. Topsparkle. "Stay, you can put on some logs before you go. 'Tis odiously cold this morning."

He went back to his sofa, which was in front of the fire. The chocolate was brought almost immediately, as if by magic, most of Mr. Topsparkle's desires being divined beforehand and duly prepared for, lest he should complain, like the late French King, that he had "almost waited."

The footman wheeled a little table beside the sofa, and arranged his master's pillows, while a second attendant spirit brought the silver-gilt chocolate service and the fashionable journals, those thin and meagre papers which in the absence of parliamentary debates eked out their scanty public news with much private scandal, announcements of intended marriages that never came off, hints at reported elopements under the thin veil of initials, theatrical criticism, and quotations from some lordling's satiric poem, for in those days almost all lordlings had an itch for satire, and fancied they could write. If the verses appeared anonymously, were fairly metrical and particularly spiteful, they

were generally debited to Pope or Lady Mary, and the anonymous lordling went about for a week or two rubbing his hands and chuckling and telling all the town under the seal of secrecy that he was the author of that remarkable lampoon which had just convulsed society.

Mr. Topsparkle sipped his chocolate, and tried to read his papers: but this morning he found himself in no humour for public news—the last letter from the Continent—the last highway robbery in Denmark Street, St. Giles—or even for the more appetising private scandal, about the Lady at Richmond Court who had suddenly retired from society, but was *not* in a wasting sickness, or the celebrated Duchess, once a famous beauty, whose housemaids had left her in a body because the ducal board wages were two shillings a week under the customary allowance. Mr. Topsparkle's mind was too intently occupied upon his own business to compassionate the Richmond lady or to speculate whether the anonymous duchess was the mighty Sarah of Blenheim, or her mad Grace of Buckinghamshire, both alike notorious for pride and parsimony.

He flung the journals aside with an oath.

"These scribblers are the stupidest scoundrels alive," he muttered, "there is not an ounce of wit in the whole fraternity. O, for the days of Steele and Addison, when one was sure of pleasant reading with one's breakfast! Their trumpery imitators give the outward form of the essay without its inward spirit."

The footman appeared

"A lady is below, sir, who says she will be mightily obliged if you will allow her ten minutes' conversation."

"Pray, who is the lady who calls at such an extraordinary hour, before a gentleman's day has begun?"

"She gave no name, sir."

"Go ask who she is."

The man retired, and returned to say the lady was a stranger to Mr. Topsparkle, and asked an interview as a favour.

"So! That sounds mysterious," said Topsparkle. "Pray, what manner of personage is she? Does she look like a genteel beggar, elderly and

shabby, in a greasy black-silk hood and mantle, eh, my man ?"

"No, sir, the person is young and handsome. She looks rather like one of the foreign singing-women your honour is pleased to patronise."

"Singing women ! Why, do you know, block-head, that those singing women, as you call them, are the beloved of princes, and have the salaries of prime ministers ? Singing women, for-sooth ! And this stranger is young and pretty, you say ?"

"Yes, sir."

"And a foreigner ?"

"I am sure of that, sir."

"You can show her up."

Mr. Topsparkle composed himself into an attitude on the sofa, like Louis XIV. Flatterers told him that he resembled that superb monarch, as he did in the fact that much of his dignity and splendour was derived from costume. Seated upon his cut velvet sofa, with the skirts of his coat spreading wide, his jewelled rapier at his side, he had certainly an almost regal air, calculated to overawe a nameless

foreign woman, who was in all probability an adventuress whose audacity was her only passport to that stately mansion.

The footman threw open the door, and announced "A lady to wait upon your honour," whereupon there came tripping in a plump little woman in a quilted satin petticoat, and short tucked-up gown, fluttering all over with cherry-coloured bows, and with a cherry-coloured hood setting off but in no wise concealing a mass of unpowdered black hair which clustered about a low forehead, and agreeably shaded the brightest black eyes Mr. Topsparkle had seen for a long time, eyes brimming with coquetry, and not without a lurking craftiness of expression which set the admiring gentleman upon his guard.

The lady's nose was *retroussé*, her lips were too thick for beauty, but of a carmine tint which was accentuated by the artful adjustment of patches; the lady's complexion was not quite so artificial as Mr. Topsparkle's, but it revealed an acquaintance with some of the highest branches of the face-painting art. The lady in general effect looked

about three-and-twenty. Mr. Topsparkle put her down for eight-and-thirty.

"My dear madam, I beg you to be seated," said Topsparkle, waving his attenuated hand graciously towards a chair, and admiring his rings and point lace ruffle as he did so. "You honour me vastly by this pleasant impromptu visit. May I offer you a cup of chocolate?"

"You are too condescending, sir. I took my chocolate before I left home," replied the cherry-coloured intruder, sinking gracefully into a chair, and rounding her plump white arms as she adjusted her cherry satin muff. "I venture to call at this early hour, before the great world has begun to besiege your lordship's door, because I have an appeal to make to your generous heart."

"I thought as much," said Mr. Topsparkle within himself. "This cherry-coloured personage has come to beg."

He was so used to be begged of that his heart had hardened itself, was adamant against all such petitions; but he did not object when the mendicant was a pretty woman, with whom he might indulge

in half an hour's innocent persiflage at the cost of a few guineas.

"Dearest madam, I am all ears," he murmured languidly.

"Sir, you behold a deeply-injured woman," said the lady, with a tragic air, and the announcement sounded like the beginning of a very long story.

"Say not so, I beseech you, madam; the character is so odiously common," protested Mr. Topsparkle. "That piquant countenance, those brilliant eyes, bespeak originality. Such a face is designed only to injure, the mission of such beauty is to destroy."

"Ah, sir, there was a day when I knew my power and used it; you who are a frequenter of the opera may perhaps remember the name and person of Coralie Legrand."

"Your person, madam, once seen can never be forgotten; and if I had heard you sing in the opera—"

"Sir, I was a dancer, not a singer," exclaimed the lady, with a wounded air.

"Was, madam; nay, speak not of yourself in

the past, '*Fuit Ilium*;' say not that such charms are for ever withdrawn from the public eye—that the flame of the candles no longer shines upon that beauty—that some selfish churl, some avaricious hoarder of loveliness, has appropriated so fair a being for his own exclusive property."

"It is true, sir. I who had once half the town at my feet am now mewed up in a stuffy parlour, and scolded if I venture to exchange half a dozen sentences with some aristocratic pretty fellow, or to venture a guinea or so at ombre."

"Soho!" exclaimed Topsparkle, becoming suddenly intent. "Your name, madam, your name, I entreat."

"I was Coralie Legrand, leading dancer in the first division of the ballet at the Royal Haymarket Opera. I am Mrs. Fétis, your valet's ill-used wife; and it is on my husband's account that I venture—"

"Madam, you have the strongest claim upon me. Fétis is an old servant—"

"He is an old servant. If I had known how old before I married him—"

"O, madam, he is not a septuagenarian; Fétis is my junior."

"He looks your lordship's senior; but it is not so much his age I object to. I would forgive him for being ninety if he were only indulgent and generous."

"Is he capable of meanness to so bewitching a wife?"

"Yes, sir, he is horribly stingy. At this hour I am being dunned to death by my next-door neighbour, to whom I owe a paltry fifteen guineas. She is Madame Furbelow, the Court milliner, a person of some ton, and she and I were dearest friends till this money trouble parted us—but 'tis shocking not to be able to pay one's debts of honour. Yet, to my certain knowledge, Fétis has lost hundreds in a single night to some of his fine gentlemen customers, who fool him by pretending to treat him as a friend. There was the wild Duke of Wharton, for instance, and his club of intriguers, the Schemers they called themselves, a committee of gallants, who used to hold their meetings at our house and plot mischief against poor innocent women—how to carry

off silly heiresses and to conquer rich widows. His Grace had a bank at faro, and that foolish husband of mine was a frequent loser."

"He must have won sometimes, madam. He must have had his lucky nights, like the rest of us."

"Then he kept his good luck to himself, sir; I never heard of it. He said he ought to have the devil's luck in love since he was so cursedly unlucky at cards and dice. And then, though he has the effrontery to deny me a few guineas, I have heard him boast that he has claims upon you which you must always honour, that your purse was a golden stream which could never run dry."

"O, he has boasted, has he, the poor foolish fellow, boasted of his power over me?"

"Nay, sir, I did not presume to mention the word 'power.' He has bragged of his services to you—long and faithful services such as no other man in Europe would have rendered to a master. He has curious fits at times—but I did not come hither to betray his secrets, poor creature; I came in the hope that your lordship, who has been ever so bountiful to my husband, could perhaps grant

some small pecuniary favour to a poor woman in distress—"

"Madam, my purse is at your service," exclaimed Topsparkle eagerly, taking out a well-filled pocket-book, and selecting a couple of bank-notes. "Here is a trifling sum which will enable you to pay your neighbour and leave a surplus for some future transactions of the same kind, or for another hood like that which becomes you so admirably. Pray, never hesitate to call upon me for any petty assistance of this kind."

The fair Coralie cooed her thanks with a gentle murmuring as of a wood-pigeon, and ventured so far as to imprint her rosy lips upon her benefactor's lean hand, a kiss which Mr. Topsparkle received as a compliment, although he stealthily wiped his hand with his cambric handkerchief the next minute.

"And you say that my poor Louis is odd at times," he said caressingly. "I hope he does not drink?"

"I think not, sir. There is a terrible deal of drinking goes on in our house, but I doubt if my husband is ever the worse for liquor. But he has

strange fits sometimes of a night, cannot sleep, or sleeps but for five minutes at a time, and then starts up from his bed and walks up and down the room, saying that he is haunted, haunted by the souls he has ruined. He says there is a ghost in *this* house."

"Indeed," cried Mr. Topsparkle, looking around him, and assuming his airiest manner, "and yet I do not fancy this looks like the habitation of ghosts. There are no cobwebs festooning the walls, no bats and owls flitting across the ceiling, no dirt, decay, or desolation."

"Nay, sir, it is a splendid house, full of beautifulest things. Yet I have heard my husband on those sleepless nights of his when he has talked more to himself than to me—I have heard him say that he has rushed out of this house at twilight with the cold sweat pouring down his face."

"Then, my dear lady, I fear there is no room to doubt that your husband has taken to drink. The symptoms you depict are precisely those of a drunkard's disease known to all medical men. The sleepless nights—the imagination of ghosts and phantoms

—the cold sweat—these are as common and as plain as the pustules that denote small-pox or the spots that indicate scarlet fever. If your husband does not drink openly, be assured he drinks deep in secret. You had better get him away from London. What say you to returning to your native country?"

Mrs. Fétis shrugged her shoulders with a doubtful air. She often talked rapturously of La Belle France, raved of her sunny south, that gracious city of Perigord where she had been born and reared to the age of fifteen. Yet for all the common purposes of life she had liked London a great deal better.

"There is nothing I should love so much," she protested. "But 'twould be madness to leave a house in which we have sunk all our means and our labour with the hope of getting our reward by a competence in our old age. Indeed, sir, we could not afford to leave Poland Street."

"Not if you were amply provided for elsewhere?" asked Topsparkle.

"Ah, sir, to be provided for by others—by a kind of pension from a wealthy benefactor for

instance," looking at him searchingly, as if she were measuring his capacity for generosity, "that is all very well for poor-spirited people—the English lower classes have no pride. But my husband and I are of an independent mind. We would rather have our liberty even in poverty than be pensioners upon any one's bounty, which might be withdrawn at a day's notice."

"Nay, a pension of that kind to be useful must be assured to you—something in the way of an annuity in the public funds, for instance—dependent on your own lives, and not upon any one else's frail thread of existence."

Mrs. Fétis looked interested, and almost convinced.

"'Twould be a delicious life and free from care; but Fétis has a passion for London, and all whom I love in my own country are dead. It would be but to go back to their graves."

Mr. Topsparkle said no more. He did not want to appear over anxious to banish his old servant, yet the man's tone to-day and the wife's revelations had intensified a feeling he had entertained for a long

time, a feeling that the hour had come when it would be very agreeable to get rid of his *âme damnée*. He would suffer considerable inconvenience undoubtedly from the loss of a valet who so thoroughly understood his complexion; but anything was better than the everlasting vicinity of a servant who knew too much.

He dismissed the Frenchwoman with a compliment, escorted her to the ante-room, and kissed her hand with a finished courtesy before he committed her to the care of the footman, and then he went back to his sofa, warmed his feet at the log-fire, and gave himself up to a serious thought.

"The man is getting dangerous," he thought; "he always was a creature of excitable temper, and now he has drunk or gamed himself into a kind of mental fever, from which perhaps the next stage would be madness. Better so! Nobody believes a madman. And if he were to make any revelations about the remote past, who is there to confirm him? No one. The old Venetian must long since have been numbered with his ancestors. The apothecary disappeared thirty years ago and left no trace behind

him. If it had not been for that damnable scandal at the time, set on foot and fostered by that villain Churchill, I could laugh any accusation of Fétis to scorn; but there are a few of my contemporaries malicious enough to have long memories, and I would do much to avoid a revival of that hellish outcry which drove me from the hustings and from the country. I have not forgotten. That hateful scene at Brentford is as vivid in my mind as if it had happened yesterday. And he has begun to talk, to get up in the middle of the night and to rave about being haunted. And this loquacious wife of his will repeat his ravings to all her gossips. Yes, there is danger, were it ever so slight. A man of my importance is a target for every venomous arrow. Fétis, you must be silenced."

He rose and paced the room slowly, meditating upon the position in all its aspects, and with all its possibilities of evil. There was his wife, of whose loyalty he was ever doubtful. What if that ancient scandal were to reach her ears? Would she not use it as a weapon against him, ally herself with her old lover for his destruction? The very thought

made that magnificent periwig of his tremulous as if with a palsy.

The man must be got out of the way somehow. If he did not snap at the bait of a handsome annuity and accept retirement to his native land, there might be other means, nearer, shorter, of disposing of him.

Yes, there was one way, short and easy, as it seemed to Mr. Topsparkle; a way of making Louis Fétis safe for ever: but that way would leave the wife at liberty—and she might be dangerous.

"No, she can be bought," thought Topsparkle, "she is vain and empty-headed. I can manage her—but he—I have been an idiot to keep him about me so long—and yet he has been useful. I have leant upon him—never knowing when I might need his help. I believed in his discretion, thought him secret as the grave; and now he has begun to blab to that silly wife of his, my confidence is destroyed for ever—all sense of security is gone."

CHAPTER IV.

"SMITE HIS HARD HEART, AND SHAKE HIS REPTILE SOUL."

With Vincenti's narrative fresh in his mind, and with a very lively recollection of Mr. Philter's story, Lord Lavendale had a keen desire to see something more of the French valet—or private secretary—who had been so diabolically subservient to his master's jealousy and revenge. There was of course always the possibility that Vincenti's theory and the floating suspicions of the neighbourhood might be without substantial foundation. People have had a knack of attributing all sudden or mysterious deaths to poison ever since the days of Sir Thomas Overbury—nor could Lord Essex cut his throat with his own razor without giving rise to an accusation of murder. In any case Lavendale was determined to see something more of the supposed tool, and to

study him on his own ground, at the house in Poland Street.

It was very easy for him to get invited to supper at this favourite rendezvous. The Schemers' Club was extinct, and almost forgotten. It had expired with Wharton's disgrace and exile; and Wharton himself, the brilliant orator, the unscrupulous turncoat, the prodigal and profligate, was a wanderer in the wilds of Catalonia, ruined, broken, and dying.

There were other bloods of the same kidney, lesser lights in the firmament of pleasure, and one of these, Sir Randal Hetherington, invited Lavendale to a card party at the house in Poland Street.

"'Tis a snug retreat, where a gentleman can receive his friends without being stared at by the chance mob of a chocolate house; 'tis more secluded even than a club, and has the advantage of admitting feminine company," he said; "and Fétis has one of the best cooks in London. A very clever fellow, Fétis, monstrously superior to his station—knows more about foreign politics than Peterborough or

Horace Walpole; I have sometimes suspected that he is one of old Fleury's spies."

Lavendale went, supped, and drank deep of the champagne which Mr. Fétis supplied to his patrons at a guinea a bottle, but not so deep as to lose a word that was spoken or a single indication which could enlighten him as to the character of his host, who waited upon the little party in person during supper, and afterwards sat down to cards with them, received upon a footing which was more familiar than friendship, something after the kind of condescending jocose intimacy which obtained between the princes and court jesters of old.

Fétis under such conditions was an altogether different person from Mr. Topsparkle's sedate and silent valet. He had a Rabelaisian wit which kept the table in a roar, had a fund of French anecdotes, short, sharp, and pungent, *àpropos* to every turn of the conversation. He had been carefully and piously educated in his early youth, and out of the theological learning acquired in those days was able to furnish an inexhaustible flow of blasphemy.

"I never knew a man who could get such a fine effect out of so small a knowledge of the Scriptures," said young Spencer, the Duchess of Marlborough's prodigal grandson, and one of the finest gentlemen upon town. He and his elder brother were both patrons of the house in Poland Street, supped there with a confidential friend or two on a bladebone of mutton and a magnum of Burgundy, after the play, as the prologue to a quiet hour at hazard, or gave a choice banquet in the French style to a bevy of stage beauties.

Lavendale marked the change in Fétis from the grave and high-bred servant to the audacious jester, and saw in it the clue to the man's character—a creature of various masks, who could fit his manners to the occasion; but he saw also that the man was of a highly nervous excitable temperament, and that a long life of iniquity had wasted his physical forces to extreme attenuation.

"He is of a more spiritual type than his master, in spite of that gentleman's various accomplishments," thought Lavendale, "and with him the flame in the lamp burns brighter, the oil that feeds

it wastes faster. Not a man to stand a violent shock of any kind, I doubt."

As the night wore on, and the party grew more riotous, and less observant of one another, Lavendale took an opportunity to talk apart with Fétis.

"I think we have met before, Monsieur Fétis?" he said.

"Yes, my lord, frequently. I was at Ringwood Abbey in attendance upon Mr. Topsparkle while you were visiting there last winter."

"True, 'twas there I saw you, slipping past me in a corridor with a most incomparable modesty. I dreamt not what a roguish wit was hidden under so subdued and sober an aspect."

"Your lordship must consider that in Mr. Topsparkle's house I am in some measure a servant. Here I am on my own ground, and these gentlemen are good enough to indulge all my follies."

"Ringwood Abbey did not give me my first knowledge of you," said Lavendale, watching the crafty face, as Fétis trifled with a silver-gilt snuffbox. "Your renown had reached me before then. I heard of you some years ago when I was

travelling in Italy, where you are still remembered."

"Indeed, my lord! It is ten years since I was in Italy."

"These memories were of an older date. They went back to the last century, when you were a youth and a student, an adept in chemistry, I am told."

Fétis started, and turned towards his interlocutor with an ashen countenance, the snuffbox shaking in his tremulous hand.

"Who told you that?" he asked; "who remembers me so long?"

"An old Venetian who happened to hear of you at that time, and who is one of my most intimate friends."

"Will your lordship tell me his name?"

He had recovered himself by this time, and had closed the snuffbox, not without spilling a slight shower of the scented mixture upon his olive-silk knee-breeches.

"Borromeo."

Fétis shook his head.

"I have no memory of such a person. Yes, my

lord, I was in Venice forty years ago as a travelling secretary to Mr. Topsparkle. We were both young men in those days, and I was more of a student than I have ever been since that time. The world soon drew me from the study of science; but at three-and-twenty I was full of enthusiasm, hoped to discover the philosopher's stone, to make myself as powerful as Dr. Faustus. Idle dreams, my lord. The world is wiser nowadays. I am told that Sir Richard Steele was the last person who ever cultivated the necromantic arts in England, and that he set up his laboratory at Islington. But even he learnt to laugh at his own delusions."

"But there are more practical studies for the chemist than the arts of Paracelsus or the Geber Arabs," said Lavendale lightly. "My informant told me that you had the repute of being a great toxicologist."

Fétis looked at the speaker intently, but did not answer for the moment. He seemed sunk in a reverie.

"Borromeo," he muttered to himself; "I know no such name."

"Fétis, the deal is yours," cried Mr. Spencer, and Fétis took the cards with a mechanical air, and went on with the game.

Lavendale was satisfied. He had gone far enough for a first attack, and he had seen enough in the manner and expression of the man to assure him that Vincenti's story was true.

"And the woman I love is married to a secret assassin!" he thought despairingly, "and when I might have plucked her out of that hell yonder, I drew back and left her there at peril of her life! If he was capable of murdering that early victim of his forty years ago, at what crime would he stop now, hardened and emboldened by a long life of wickedness? She has but to go a step too far—provoke his jealousy beyond endurance—and Mr. Fétis and his black art may be invoked again. Fool that I was to leave her in his power, and yet—" And yet he felt that the alternative might have been worse—to ally her to a fast vanishing life, to leave her with a dishonoured name, ruined in worldly circumstance, widowed in heart without a widow's title of honour, desolate, unpitied, to wander about the Con-

tinent in fourth-rate society—an outcast—as the Duke of Wharton was wandering now. No, that would have been a moral murder, worse than the hazard of Topsparkle's revenge. Again, there was always this to be considered—that, although a nameless foreign mistress might be murdered almost with impunity, it would be a very perilous matter to make away with an English lady of rank.

"No, she is safe," reflected Lavendale, "and if she is unhappy she wears her rue with a difference —everybody thinks her the gayest and luckiest of women. I will not waste my pity upon her."

Before the entertainment was over, his lordship and Mr. Fétis were on the friendliest terms.

"You must visit me in Bloomsbury Square, Monsieur Fétis," said Lavendale. "The house is not without interest, for 'twas a chosen resort of the Whigs in Godolphin's time, and it has seen some curious meetings at the beginning of the late king's reign."

"I shall be proud to wait upon your lordship."

"Say you so; then name your evening to sup with me. Shall it be to-morrow?"

"If your lordship has no better occupation."

"I could have none better. Your mind is a treasury of interesting facts, Mr. Fétis, and your conversation is the best entertainment I can imagine for an idle hour after supper. I want to talk with you of my poor friend Wharton. He and I have been companions in many a revel in London and Vienna; and 'tis sad to think that fiery comet should have plunged so fast into space and darkness, a burnt-out shell."

"His grace was one of my most generous friends and patrons, and I mourn for him as for a son," said Fétis.

Lavendale went home in a thoughtful mood, and was glad to find lights burning in Durnford's study, and that his friend was sitting up late to finish his newspaper work, after a long afternoon at the House. Herrick and Irene were still his lordship's guests, and he was very loth to part with them; but they had found a cottage at Battersea, with a garden sloping to the river, not far from that big house of Lord St. John's which dominated the village. The cottage

was in a wretched state of repair, and a month or more must elapse before it could be made habitable; but to Herrick and Irene there was rapture in the idea of this modest home which was to be all their own, maintained by the husband's industry, brightened and beautified by the young wife's care.

Mdlle. Latour was in possession already, living in the one habitable room, and superintending the repairs and improvements. She was installed as Irene's housekeeper, with a stout servant-girl for the rest of the establishment.

Lavendale was vexed that his friend should not be content to share his home in London and Surrey.

"'Tis churlish of you to go and build your own nest four miles off, and leave me to the desolation of empty rooms and echoing passages," he complained. "Pray, have I been over-officious in my hospitality, or intrusive of my company? Have I ever disturbed your billing and cooing?"

"You have done all that hospitality and delicatest feeling could do to make us happy, dear Jack,"

returned Herrick warmly; "but it is not well for any man to set up his Lares and Penates under another man's roof. The sense of independence, the burden of bread-winning, is the one attribute of manhood which no man dare surrender, least of all when he has a dear soul dependent upon him. What would the world say, d'ye think, were my wife and I to riot in luxury at your cost?"

"Damn the world!"

"Ay, Jack, I could afford to say that while I was a bachelor; but for my wife's sake I must truckle to the town, and do nothing to forfeit the most pragmatical person's good opinion. Do you think I shall love you less when I am living at Battersea?"

"I know that I shall have less of your society—that when my dark hour is on there will be no one to cheer me."

"Order your horse and ride to Battersea whenever the dark hour comes. The ride will do you good, and you shall have a loving welcome and a decent meal, come when you may. We shall always keep open house for you."

"And I shall visit you so often as to make you heartily sick of me. Good God, Herrick, how I envy you your happiness, your future with its fulness of hope; while for me there is nothing—"

Herrick clasped his hand without a word; that honest affectionate grasp was all the comfort he could offer to one whose wasted life and broken constitution left scarce the possibility of hope on this side of the grave; and to suggest spiritual consolation at all times and seasons was not in Herrick's line. He knew too well that no man could be preached into piety.

Lavendale went straight to the room where his friend was at work, and told him of his evening in Poland Street, and of his invitation to Fétis. He had told Herrick all the facts in Vincenti's narrative, and the two had discussed the story together. Herrick was keenly interested, and it was partly on his suggestion that Lavendale had made himself familiar with the Fétis establishment.

"Let him come to-morrow night by all means," he said eagerly, "and if we lay our heads together

meanwhile, we might, I think, with Irene's help, frighten the wretch into a confession."

"What, after forty years of secrecy, after having so hardened himself in crime!"

"Well, say an admission of some kind—a full confession were perhaps too much to expect. Nothing but the immediate prospect of a hempen necklace would extort that. And yet it has been found that the most hardened villain has sometimes a vein of superstition, an abject terror of that spirit world whose judgments and punishments he has hazarded so audaciously."

"With Irene's help, you said. What has Irene to do with the matter?"

"Have you forgotten that picture in Mr. Topsparkle's cabinet—that Italian head which might have been intended for my wife's portrait, so vivid was the likeness?"

"Yes, I remember it perfectly."

"I have a notion that I can play upon Fétis's feelings by means of that resemblance."

"But the likeness will not be new to him. He saw your wife at Ringwood Abbey."

"Yes; but the circumstances under which he shall see her again will be new, and his own feelings will be new. Leave me to work out my scheme after my own fashion, Jack. All you have to do is to ply your guest with the strongest liquor he will swallow, and then watch and listen."

CHAPTER V.

"I'LL JOIN WITH THEE IN A MOST JUST REVENGE."

FÉTIS repaired to Bloomsbury Square next evening, not altogether with the innocent simplicity of the lamb that goes to the slaughter, but with the caution of an astute mind which perceives a snare in every civility, and suspects a trap in every invitation.

"Why was the man so civil, and what does he know about my life in Venice forty years ago?"

Those were the questions which had agitated the Frenchman's mind during that brief remnant of the night which he had spent in restless wakefulness, and they had proved unanswerable. Caution might have prompted him to avoid Lord Lavendale's house and turn a deaf ear to that nobleman's civilities; but anxiety made him curious, and fear of the future made him bold in the present. He wanted to know the extent of Lavendale's knowledge of his own past life, and to that end he accepted his lordship's invi-

tation. His vanity again, which was large, made him suppose himself a match for Lord Lavendale in any intellectual encounter.

"If he has courted me in order to pump me for the secrets of the past, he will find he has wasted his trouble," thought Mr. Fétis, as his chair was being carried through perilous St. Giles's.

It was eleven o'clock, a late hour for supper; but Lord Lavendale had been at the House of Lords, and had dined with some of his brother peers after the debate. Supper had been prepared in the late lord's private sitting-room, a small triangular parlour at the end of a stately suite of reception-rooms, a room which had been rarely used of late, but which Herrick, for some unexplained motive, had selected as the scene of this evening's entertainment. It was altogether the cosiest room in the house, and with a heaped-up fire of sea-coal and oak logs in the wide grate, a small round table laid for supper, a pair of silver candelabra holding a dozen wax candles, and a side table loaded with all the materials for a jovial evening, the little triangular parlour looked the very picture of comfort.

The brightness and warmth of the room had an agreeable effect upon Mr. Fétis, who had been chilled and depressed for the moment by those cold and empty apartments through which a footman had ushered him by the light of a single candle, borne aloft as the man stalked in advance with a ghostlike air.

"Let me perish, my lord, but your empty saloons have given me the shivers," said Fétis, as he warmed his spindleshanks at the blaze; "your tall footman looked like a spectre."

"Come, come, Mr. Fétis, you are not the kind of man to believe in apparitions," said Durnford gaily. "I think we are all materialists here, are we not? We accept nothing for truth that cannot be mathematically demonstrated."

Lavendale looked grave. "It is not every sceptic who is free from superstition," he said. "There are men who cannot believe in a Personal God, and who will yet tremble at a shadow. I have known an infidel who would scoff at the Gospel, stand up for the story of the Witch of Endor.

Mr. Fétis shrugged his shoulders, and did not pursue the argument.

The butler and a pair of footmen brought in the hot dishes, and opened a magnum of champagne, and supper began in serious earnest—one of those exquisite suppers for which Lavendale had been renowned in his wild youth, when he had vied with the Regent Philip in the studied extravagance of his table.

Fétis was a connoisseur, and his secret anxieties did not hinder him from doing ample justice to the meal. Lavendale pretended to eat, but scarcely tasted the delicacies which were set before him. Durnford ate hurriedly, hardly knowing what he was eating, full of nervous anticipation. Fétis was the only one of the party who could calmly appreciate the talents of the *chef* and the aroma of the wines.

He refused champagne altogether, as a liquor only fit for boyhood and senility; but he highly approved the Burgundy, which had been laid down by the last Lord Lavendale, and had been maturing for nearly fifteen years.

"There is no wine like that which comes from the Côte d'Or," he said; and then, in a somewhat

cracked voice, he chirruped a stanza of Villon's "Ballade joyeuse des Taverniers."

"I did not see your lordship at the opera to-night," he said presently.

"No, I was at a less agreeable entertainment. I was at the House of Lords. Was the Opera House full?"

"A galaxy of fashion and beauty; but I think that lady whom I may call my mistress still bears the palm. There was not a woman among them to outshine Mr. Topsparkle's wife."

"He has reason to be proud of such a wife," said Lavendale lightly. "Fill your glass, I beg, Mr. Fétis, or I shall doubt your liking for that wine. She is not his first wife, by the way—nor his first beautiful wife. My Italian friend told me that Topsparkle carried off one of the handsomest women in Venice when he left that city. What became of the lady?"

"She died young."

"In Italy?"

"No, my lord. Mr. Topsparkle brought the young lady to London, and she died of colic—or in

all likelihood of the plague—at his house in Soho Square."

"Was she his wife?"

"That question, my lord, rests with Mr. Topparkle's conscience. If he was married to the young lady I was not admitted to his confidence. I was not present at the marriage; but she was always spoken of in the household as Mrs. Topsparkle; and I, as a servant, had no right to question her claim to that title."

"I have heard that there was something mysterious about her death; something that aroused suspicion in the neighbourhood."

"O, my lord, all sudden deaths are accounted suspicious nowadays. There has not been a prince of the blood royal, or a nobleman that has died in France during the last thirty years, but there has been talk of poison, although the disease has been as obvious in its characteristics as disease can ever be. Small-pox, ague, putrid fever, have one and all been put down to the late Regent and his accomplices; whereas that poor good-natured prince would scarce have trodden willingly upon a worm. Never was a

kinder creature, yet his heart was wrung many a time by the vilest accusations circulated with an insolent openness. As for Mrs. Topsparkle's death, I could give you all the medical details, were you curious enough to listen to them."

His manner was serenity itself; and it was difficult to suppose that guilt could lurk under so placid an aspect, so easy a bearing. Yet last night the first allusion to his life in Venice had blanched his cheek and made his hand tremulous. The difference was that he had then been unprepared, while to-night he was fortified against every shock, and had schooled himself to answer every question.

"The suspicion was doubtless unfounded," said Lavendale, "but I have heard that the slander banished Mr. Topsparkle from this country."

"My master was over sensitive regarding the lampoons and libels which are rife at all elections, and which were directed against him with peculiar venom on account of his wealth, his youth, and his accomplishments," answered Fétis. "He left England in a fit of disgust after the Brentford Election; and as a Continental life had always suited his

humour, he lived abroad for thirty years, with but occasional visits to his native country."

"You stand by him with a truly loyal spirit, which is worthy of all admiration," said Durnford.

"'Twere hard if there were no fidelity between master and servant after forty years' service. I know Mr. Topsparkle's failings, and can compassionate him where he is weak and erring. He is a man of a jealous temper, and did not live altogether happily with the Italian lady of whom you were talking. It was known in the household that they had quarrelled—that there had been tears, scenes, recrimination on his side, distress on hers. This knowledge was the only ground for suspicion among the busybodies of the neighbourhood when the young lady died after an illness of two days. The fools did not take the trouble to know or to consider that she had never properly recovered her health after the birth of her infant."

"What became of that infant, Mr. Fétis?"

"She was educated abroad, and turned out badly. I can tell you nothing about her," replied Fétis, with an impatient shrug. "I had nothing to do with

her bringing up, nor do I know her fate. I have never tried to pry into my master's secrets."

"But surely you, who were so much more than a servant, almost a brother, must have known everything," urged Lavendale; and then with a lighter air he added, "but 'tis inhospitable to plague you about the history of the past when we are met here to enjoy the present. What say you to a shake of the dice-box to raise our spirits?"

Fétis assented eagerly, with all a gamester's gusto, and he and Lord Lavendale spent nearly an hour at hazard, until the Frenchman had a pile of guineas lying in front of him, and in the pleasure of winning had drunk deep of that fine old Burgundy which he had praised at supper. He played with a feverish excitement which Lavendale had remarked in his manner on the previous evening; but to-night the fiery energies of the man were intensified. He was like a man possessed by devils.

When Lavendale grew weary of losing, and would have left off, the Frenchman urged him to go on a little longer.

"I am generally an unlucky wretch: you will

have your revenge presently," he said eagerly, and after a few more turns Fétis began to lose.

Lavendale swept up the dice and flung them into a drawer.

"It would have been unmannerly to leave off while you were winning, Monsieur Fétis," he said; "but now the luck is turned against you, I will own I have had enough. What can be this passion of cards which possesses some of us to grovel for a long night over the board of green cloth? I have never known the gambler's fiercest fever, though I have played deep enough in my time; and now my soul soon sickens of the stale diversion."

The Frenchman pocketed his pile of gold with a mechanical air, and looked about him like a man awakened suddenly from a feverish dream. His hands trembled a little as he adjusted his wig, which had been pushed awry in his excitement. His eyes had a glassy brightness, and it was obvious that he was the worse for liquor.

"Good-night, my lord; Mr. Durnford, your servant. I fear I have kept your lordship up very late. If we have trenched somewhat on the dead of night—"

"Monsieur Fétis, the pleasure of your society has been an ample recompense for the loss of slumber," said Lavendale. "My chairmen shall take you home. They have been told to wait for you."

"Indeed, your lordship is too considerate."

"The rest of my people have gone to bed, I believe; Durnford, will you light Monsieur Fétis to the hall?"

Herrick took a candle from a side table and led the way through the empty rooms, cold and dark and unspeakably dismal after the light and warmth of that cosy parlour in which the three men had supped. The atmosphere struck a chill to the soul of Fétis as he entered the first of those disused reception-rooms. Herrick's one candle shed but a faint gleam of light, which served only to accentuate the gloom. Gigantic shadows, strange forms of vague blackness, like the monstrous inhabitants of some mysterious underworld, seemed to emerge out of the corners and creep towards Fétis—dragon-like monsters, with spreading pinions and eagle claws. They were but the shadow-forms of incipient delirium tremens; but to him who beheld them they were unspeakably horrible.

Yet these were as nothing to that which came afterwards.

He crept with a curious cat-like gait across the room, shrinking from side to side to avoid the clutch of those shadowy claws, to avoid being caught up and enfolded for ever beneath those dark pinions, but on the threshold of the next room he gave a wild yell of agony, and fell on his knees, grovelling, the powdered wig pushed from his bald head by those nerveless hands of his, and drops of cold sweat breaking out upon his wrinkled forehead.

At the further end of the room, luminous in the faint rays of a lamp, he saw a shadow in a long white garment, a pale face, and dark eyes gazing upon him with a solemn stillness, a pale immovable countenance, like that of the dead.

"Spare me! spare me!" he cried. "O, pale, sad victim, have I not atoned? Haunt me no more, poor murdered wretch, betrayed, betrayed, betrayed at every turn! Thy cup of sorrow was full, but O, forgive thy much more wretched murderer! Pity, and pardon!'

The words came in short gasps—uttered in a

shrill treble that was almost a scream. They had a sound like the cry of a tortured animal—seemed hardly human to those who heard them. He held his hands before his eyes, clasped convulsively over the eyeballs to shut out the vision that appalled him; and then gradually he collapsed altogether, and sank fainting on the threshold.

When consciousness returned he was seated in front of an open window, the cool night air blowing in upon him, sharp with the breath of late autumn.

"Where am I?" he faltered.

"You are with those who have judged and condemned you," answered Lavendale solemnly. "Murderer!"

"Who dares call me by that name?"

"I, Lavendale. My friend here, Durnford, is witness with me of your guilty terror. You have seen the ghost of her whom you murdered, or helped to murder. You have seen the ghost of your innocent victim, Margharita Vincenti."

"It was Topsparkle's crime. I was but the assistant and tool. The guilt was his. I was only a faithful servant."

"I doubt you were the inspirer of most of his iniquities at that time," said Lavendale. "It was your knowledge of poisons which put him in the way of accommodating his sated love and gratifying his revenge at one stroke. It is only the dead who do not come back."

That last gust of October wind did its work. Fétis rose to his feet with his nerves restored, and faced his accuser with an easy insolence.

"Your lordship's wine has been too strong for my poor brain," he said lightly, "and I fear I have troubled you with one of my raving fits. My good little wife will tell you that I am subject to a kind of brain fever after anything in the way of a debauch. Your lordship should not have tempted me to so far exceed my usual two bottles. Pray, Mr. Durnford, be so good as to show me to the hall. I shall not trouble your lordship's chairmen. The walk home will steady my poor head. Your lordship's most humble and deeply obliged servant."

He gave a low bow, a succession of bows rather, with which he bent and wriggled himself out of

Lord Lavendale's presence, in a series of serpentine curves.

Lavendale made as if he would have sprung at him, longing to clutch at that wizened throat and pin the secret murderer to the floor, to imprison him for the rest of the night, and deliver him over to the officers of justice in the morning; but Durnford laid a warning hand upon his shoulder.

"Let him go," he whispered. "There is no evidence against him yet."

Lavendale submitted, and Durnford led the way to the hall, and saw Mr. Fétis out of doors with supreme courtesy. Fétis flung a couple of crowns to the sleepy chairmen as he passed out.

"Get to your beds, my good fellows," he said. "My legs are steady enough to carry me home, in spite of your master's Burgundy."

"Why did you not help me to detain him?" asked Lavendale, when Durnford rejoined him in the wainscoted parlour. "What can justice want more than the wretch's own confession of his guilt?"

"Justice—as represented by a Bow Street magistrate—would want a great deal more evidence than

the incoherent ravings of a drunkard, repeated at second hand. Our moral certainty that Fétis poisoned your old Venetian's granddaughter will not hang him, any more than the suspicions of the neighbours and the apothecary forty years ago."

"Yet I think your little play succeeded, and that the craven hound revealed himself clearly enough at sight of your poor pale wife, scared to death at the part she had to act, and looking every inch a ghost. Neither you nor I can ever doubt that he and Topsparkle were accomplices in a villainous murder. A pleasant reflection for one who loves Topsparkle's wife, and might have run away with her, yet chose to play the moralist and leave her in a murderer's clutches."

"'Twould have been a worse murder to slay her honour, as you would have done. She is safe enough with her wicked old husband, guarded and fenced round by society. Lady Judith is a personage. Topsparkle trembles at her frown."

"Yes, as the devils are said to tremble before the Eternal; but his heart may rebel against her all the same, torn by jealous fury. To know himself old,

effete, a mere simulacrum of humanity, and to see her surrounded by all the bucks and bloods of the town, idolising and pursuing her: could the infernal powers in Tartarus invent a more horrible agony for a worn-out old profligate? And when once a man has got his hand at poisoning, how easy the art! See how often my Lord This or my Lady That is hustled into the family vault after a three days' illness—a fever, a putrid sore-throat, the Lord knows what! Two or three doses of arsenic or antimony, and the trick is done. 'Putrid fever,' says the physician. 'Your house is unhealthy, Mr. Topsparkle. I have heard your first wife died of the same kind of malady. You should move further to the West; the new houses in Cavendish Square are almost in the country. Here you are too near to Newgate and the Compter. The foul odours of the gaol-birds are blown in at your windows by every east wind.' Do you think Lady Judith's untimely death would be more than a nine days' wonder, happen when it might?"

"I think you should concern yourself less about her, dear Jack, for your own peace of mind."

"That was shattered long ago, friend. It is gone irrevocably, shivered, smashed, annihilated, like that glass goblet which was once the luck of Eden Hall. O, that Topsparkle is a damned villain! Could I but see him and his accomplice at the Old Bailey, I would answer the dread summons cheerfully. But to die and leave those two behind, and to leave her in their power!"

"God grant that you may outlive those ancient sinners."

"God will not grant it, Herrick. My days are numbered, like the beads upon a rosary—I am telling them off bead by bead—'tis but a short string."

"Dear Jack, if thou would'st consult a physician instead of talking this wild nonsense, and if thou would'st but take care of thyself—"

"I might live to be ninety—on ass's milk—like Hervey. Open another bottle of Burgundy, Herrick, we are too much in the dismals."

"You shall have no more to-night."

"Shall I not, Mentor? Then I will go to bed and dream I am in Mahomet's paradise, where lovely woman intoxicates instead of wine."

CHAPTER VI.

"WHEN SCREECH-OWLS CROAK UPON THE CHIMNEY-TOPS."

The house in Poland Street was scarce alive with the sound of footsteps on the stairs, or the opening and shutting of doors, until the day was well on towards noon. The cry of the sweep and the small coal man, the baker with his rolls, and Irish Molly with her clattering milk-pails, passed over the sleeping household, and was scarce heard dimly in a dream by any member of that strangely compacted family. The lodgers were for the most part such gentlemen as only began to think of their morning tea or chocolate when it was afternoon by the sun-dial. The landlord and his wife, being always among the last to retire, rose late in the morning with a struggle, lamenting the brevity of the night. Your bad sleeper is ever the most reluctant to rise, for his

one chance of slumber comes generally in that fatal hour when business or duty compels him to leave his bed. Fétis, who passed most of his nights in feverish unrest, was apt after sunrise to sink into the deep sleep of mental and bodily exhaustion; but he must needs rise at ten in order to wait upon his master in Soho Square, whose toilet generally began at eleven. Madame Fétis coiled herself round like a dormouse, and would have slept twelve hours at a stretch if permitted; but as she rarely went to bed before three o'clock in the morning, so much indulgence was impossible. The house must be in order soon after noon, and delicate dainty little breakfasts must be served up for any distinguished patrons who might have spent the night upon the premises. And neither cook nor underlings could be trusted unless Madame was there with her keen bright eyes overlooking everything. It was Madame who made my lord Duke's chocolate, and buttered my lord Marquis's toast. She was the moving principle of grace and order in the household.

At one o'clock on the day after Lord Lavendale's supper-party, at an hour when the sober jog-

trot citizens of London had dined or were in the act of dining, Madame sat sipping her chocolate, in a morning *négligé* of dove-coloured tabinet—a material which Dr. Swift had done his best to make popular, through the Queen and Princesses, for the benefit of the Irish weavers. Her lace ruffles at neck and wrist were of the finest Buckinghamshire, and she wore a little mob-cap upon her piled-up tresses of unpowdered hair, which was vastly becoming. At her side lay an open ledger, and a brace of bills, which were to be delivered to his Grace and the Marquis later in the afternoon. As she sipped and munched, the lady compared the items in the bills with the figures in the ledger, and with this reading solaced her morning meal. She stopped occasionally to make a calculation with the aid of her roseate finger-tips, laboriously counted, for she resembled the great Duchess Sarah alike in being an excellent woman of business, and completely ignorant of the simplest rules of arithmetic.

For the first time for at least a year Mr. Fétis had failed in his morning duties at Mr. Topsparkle's toilet. He had come home from his evening enter-

tainment very ill, and he was no better this morning; so Madame had been obliged to send a little note of apology to Soho Square, a missive composed in equal parts of French and English, with an impartial measure of bad spelling in both languages.

Madame's apartment was a small front parlour, close to the street door. From her window she could survey an approaching visitor, while from her door she could overhear any conversation that was carried on in the passage, and keep herself informed as to every one who went out or came in. It was the spider's little parlour into which many a giddy buzzing fly had fluttered unwarily, to emerge with clipped wings. It was Circe's cave; and the bones of innumerable victims lay bleaching there, from a metaphorical point of view.

To-day Madame Fétis was so deeply absorbed in the addition of that long column of figures that she was less on the alert than usual for external sounds, and she was surprised by the setting down of a sedan in front of her door, and within three feet of her window. It was a private sedan, painted and fitted with that studied simplicity which indicated dis-

tinction in the owner. The panels were a dark brown, the armorial bearings were unobtrusive—all was dark, plain, sober in style. Madame Fétis had not time to wonder, for the orange and brown liveries of the footmen who preceded the vehicle informed her that the chair could belong to no less important a person than her husband's patron and quasi-master, the rich Mr. Topsparkle; and the little Frenchwoman's heart fluttered with gratified vanity at the idea that her fascinations had brought Mr. Topsparkle to her husband's house, which he had never visited before.

"The powdered pert proficient in the art" of disturbing a whole street by his performance on the knocker now proceeded to startle the midday quiet by a most prodigious fantasia in iron. Madame flew to open the door, and stood smiling and curtseying as Mr. Topsparkle descended from his chair, treading delicately, like the ladies of ancient Jerusalem.

"Dear Madam, you do me too much honour," he protested, as he entered the panneled passage, bringing a cloud of perfumed powder and an overpowering odour of attar of roses into the semi-darkness of the

narrow entry. "It is not often that Cerberus is replaced by Hebe."

"My servants are so lazy, your honour," apologised Madame; "our Cerberus is cleaning the shoes in his morning sleep, and my *femme de chambre* has scarce made up her mind whether the broom she is using is a dream or a reality. If your honour will be so condescending as to step into the parlour—"

"One moment, madam," said Topsparkle, and then turning to the open door he waved his hand to the footmen. "You can take my chair home, you fellows. I shall walk."

The chairmen took up their lightened load, and the footmen trudged off in front of the sedan, as Madame Fétis shut the door, and followed her visitor into the little parlour, where she drew forward a large arm-chair, in which she was wont to take her afternoon sleep, and which was naturally the most luxurious seat in the room, or it would not have been so favoured.

"So my good Fétis has broken down at last," said Mr. Topsparkle, as he seated himself.

"Yes, sir; he is very ill."

"I was hardly surprised at receiving your amiable billet. I have been meditating on our little chat t'other day, my good Madame Fétis," pursued Topsparkle, lolling negligently forward in the commodious chair, with his elbow on his knee, and drawing figures upon the dusty carpet with the amber tip of his cane, "and as I am deeply concerned in the health—above all in the mental health —of your excellent husband, I felt an anxiety to hear more from the same source; so instead of sending a footman to make inquiries, I have come myself. I know the uneasiness of a wife's affection, and that her tenderness may exaggerate the signs of evil—"

"Indeed, sir, I don't exaggerate my husband's condition," exclaimed the lady, with a fretful air; "it grows worse and worse; and I dread the day when I shall see him carried off to Bedlam in a strait waistcoat. 'Twas only last night that he had a worse outbreak than ever, and the night before that—"

"The night before that you had Jack Spencer, and Lord Lavendale, and a party to supper and

cards," interrupted Topsparkle, tapping Madame's plump arm with the tips of his skinny fingers. "Oh, I have heard of your banquetings and revelries, *ma belle*, and the money that is lost and won under this modest roof of yours."

" Indeed, sir, it was a very sober party. There were no ladies, and there was no broken glass, nor an item of furniture damaged. I protest we should never make both ends meet by such parties as that, though I own Mr. Spencer flings a guinea where any other gentleman would give a shilling. But 'tis the madcap evenings—when the ladies and gentlemen take to romping over their supper, or when there are swords drawn at cards, and the furniture damaged—that bring grist to the mill."

" And so there was not much diversion at Mr. Spencer's party—'twas a grave and sedate assembly," said Topsparkle, with a trivial gossiping air, as of one who talked from sheer idleness; "but those quiet evenings are more dangerous than your romping revelries. I'll warrant the play was high."

Madame shook her head gloomily.

"Ay, I'll warrant it was, your honour, for that silly husband of mine tossed about in a wakeful fever till daylight, and raved like a lunatic towards nine o'clock, when he fell asleep—raved about Venice and one Borromeo. Does your honour remember any friend of my husband's by that name?"

"Borromeo?" repeated Topsparkle meditatively. "No, the name is strange to me. And so your husband talked in his sleep, and about Venice? Do his thoughts often turn that way?"

"'Tis the first time I have heard him. His ravings have been mostly about your honour's house in Soho Square. What can there be in that splendid mansion which should give Louis such a horror of it? He is always prating of ghosts. Do you really think 'tis haunted, sir?"

"Not one whit more than this cosy little parlour of yours, my fair friend; but servants are superstitious, and have a way of inventing a ghost for every fine old house. Mine was once occupied by Lord Grey, who was beheaded after Monmouth's rebellion; and those fools of mine have concocted

a story that his headless figure stalks in the corridors between midnight and cock-crow. There are no ghosts in Soho Square, madam, save such childish inventions as I tell you of; but I fear your husband is in a very bad way, and that these ravings of his are but too sure an indication of the brandy-drinker's disease. You must be careful of him, my good Madame Fétis, if you would not see him expire in a madhouse."

"Alas, sir, how can I take care of a man who refuses to take care of himself? 'Twas only last night I implored him not to go to a supper at Lord Lavendale's house in Bloomsbury Square, to which his lordship had invited him."

"So his lordship invited your husband to sup, did he? Vastly condescending, I protest."

"Your honour would hardly believe how much notice the highest gentlemen in the land have taken of Fétis. 'Tis that has been his ruin. Lord Lavendale was monstrously taken with him. In his sleep that night it was Lavendale at every turn—Venice—Borromeo—Lavendale—mixed in all his ravings; and then yesterday evening, after the

opera, he calls for a chair and is carried to his lordship's house, in spite of my protesting that the company he was going into would lead him into high play and hasten our ruin. He would not listen to me, but off he goes, in a sage-green ribbed velvet suit which your honour had made for the last birthday, and never wore but once—"

"I remember the suit," said Topsparkle, "it made me look as sickly as a lady of fashion in her morning cap before she puts on her rouge. It cost me ninety-five guineas for the birthday, and I gave it to Fétis next morning. 'Tis my rule never to wear a suit a second time if I don't like myself in it on the first wearing. 'Tis against good sense that a man should disgust himself with his own person for the sake of a few paltry guineas. I dare swear Fétis looks admirable in the suit. 'Tis just the colour of his own complexion."

"He looked more of a fine gentleman than 'tis well a man of his position should," replied Madame severely. "If he would take more pains to save money for his old age, and less to pass for a man of fashion, 'twould be better for both of us."

"But with so charming a wife, and with such advantages of education, a man of romantic temper might be pardoned for forgetting that he was not born in the purple," pleaded Topsparkle. "But I distract you from your narrative. You were about to say—"

"Oh, sir, could you but have seen my husband at four o'clock this morning, when he came back from his orgy."

"The word is severe, madam. Was he intoxicated?"

"Worse than that, sir. He was white as death, and trembling in every limb. He had tried to walk home, but had well nigh fallen in the street, when the chance of an empty coach saved him. He seemed as if he were struck speechless, would answer none of my questions, and let me help him to bed like a baby. Yet it was not losing his money which had overcome his senses, for the guineas fell out of his pockets and strewed the carpet as if it had been raining gold. He lay moaning half the night, till he fell into a kind of stupor."

"Did he rave as on the previous night?"

"Not one intelligible word has he uttered since he came home."

"Strange. It looks like some kind of seizure. Have you sent for a doctor?"

"No, sir; I was afraid for any one to see him in such a condition, lest it should get about the neighbourhood that he is a lunatic, and spoil our business."

"You are a vastly sensible woman, an excellent prudent creature," exclaimed Topsparkle, with enthusiasm. "Let not a mortal see him till he has got his reason again. Should it once be rumoured that he is out of his mind, you would be undone."

"I have spoken to your honour with perfect candour, as my poor husband's patron and friend," returned Madame meekly.

"You have done wisely, my good soul. I am your husband's best friend, and your only safe adviser. It is evident that he has got himself into a condition that is but one step from madness, and madness in this country is a terrible thing. It means the loss of all a man's rights as a citizen, it means the confiscation of his property, upon

which the iron clutch of the High Court of Chancery swoops down like the claw of a vulture. It means that from comfortable circumstances a maniac's family may be reduced to paupers."

"O, sir, protect me from such a calamity."

"Do not fear, sweet soul. You shall be protected. Should the worst come, and your husband must needs be removed, it shall be my sacred care to provide for you. Two hundred a year in Paris, where you might, perhaps, return to the profession which you so much adorned."

"O, sir, you have, indeed, the soul of a great nobleman. It was the dream of my girlhood to live in Paris."

"The nest shall be found for you, poor bird, if the tempest of calamity should ever blow you hence," murmured Topsparkle, patting her plump hand.

"But indeed, sir, we will hope my poor husband will recover his reason, and learn better sense," resumed Madame, after a few moments' reflection. "I am very fond of Poland Street, and this business would be a fortune for us if Fétis would leave off play."

"My dear soul, he has gone too far. He will never be cured. When a man of his age gambles or drinks, the chances of cure are nil."

"Would you like to see him, sir?"

Topsparkle suppressed a shudder.

"Better not, madam. I should but agitate him by my presence. I will call on you to-morrow, when he may be in a better condition to converse with me."

He kissed Madame's fair hand, and bowed himself out of her presence. He walked along Poland Street, across Golden Square, westward to St. James's Street, with that light and easy motion which had become natural to him, the bearing of an elderly man who never meant to be old, who defied age to wither him, and who conquered the insidious foe called Time, by being in all things younger than youth itself. Yonder gallant guardsman of five-and-twenty on the opposite pavement moved heavily compared with the airy grace with which Topsparkle skimmed the street. He had trained every muscle, schooled every sinew in the long fight against senility. By his temperance and

his activity he had contrived so far to have the best of the battle. The day of defeat must come sooner or later, he knew, and he had steeled himself to contemplate the end with a cynical courage. "May it be sharp and swift," he said; "may I crumble to pieces in an hour, like an embalmed corpse which is suddenly exposed to the air after two thousand years in an Egyptian sepulchre."

To-day, though his mind was full of perplexity, his movements and the carriage of his head were as jaunty as ever. No one who saw those dainty red-heeled shoes tripping along, and the careless swing of that slender rapier, would have supposed that Mr. Topsparkle was meditating anything more serious than the last quarrel between the Cuzzoni faction and the Faustina faction at the opera house, or the last wild exploit of mad-cap Peterborough at Bevis Mount.

What was to be done with this worn-out tool of his, which was getting dangerous? That was the question. It had never occurred to Vyvyan Topsparkle that his accomplice would not last as long as himself; that this slave of his, who had done his bid-

ding with an unscrupulous obedience which indicated a mind utterly callous to the distinction between right and wrong, should at the eleventh hour develop a guilty conscience and all its attendant inconveniences.

"It is not conscience," thought Topsparkle savagely. "The man cares no more for that false feeble creature who lies in St. Anne's churchyard than he cares for St. Anne herself. It is brandy and not conscience that moves him. He has destroyed his nerves by intemperance, and must needs call up the dead to torment himself and endanger me. A madhouse—yes, that is the safest abode for a gentleman in this disposition. I have only to find out a safe asylum, and then, presto, my friend Fétis shall be bestowed where a strait waistcoat will tame his antics, and the free use of the gag will put a stop to his invocations of the dead. A mad-doctor and a private madhouse—that is what I have to find without loss of time."

Then, after walking a little further, cudgelling his brain in the effort to remember all he had ever heard about the incarceration of madmen in Eng-

land, he reverted to a question which was more perplexing to him than the ravings of Fétis.

"Lavendale, *que diable allait il faire dans cette galère?* what the deuce can impel Lavendale to patronise my valet? and why should his lordship's society revive old associations with Venice, and reduce the man from semi-lunacy to dumb melancholic madness, as I doubt his state must be to-day, if his wife speaks truth? There is mystery and mischief here, and I cannot too soon protect myself from the chances of awkward revelations. There must be some private way of dealing with madmen, without shutting them up in that great hospital by London Wall, where all the world may see them at a penny a head, easier and cheaper than the lions in the Tower. I remember how Lavendale and his friend were struck by that marvellous likeness between Miss Bosworth and Margharita; yet what should come of that, an accidental resemblance, curious, but of no significance? I almost hated that girl for the shock her face gave me every time we met. It was a constant oppression to my spirits to have her in my house. And now they say Durnford

has run away with her, and married her at Keith's Chapel, and that her father has thrown her off in consequence, so that my gentleman has but a penniless beauty for his partner in life, and no doubt will soon repent his bargain. Why should Lavendale invite my valet? O, a whim, no doubt, a trick, a practical joke, such as Wharton and his Schemers used to hatch t'other day—some conspiracy against a woman's peace or reputation. Something modish, witty, and iniquitous, no doubt. Why should I fancy there is mischief to me amidst such random follies? But the fact remains that Fétis has taken to blabbing, and must be gagged. Yes, my poor, good, faithful, self-serving servant, you were a very convenient and useful person so long as you knew how to hold your tongue, but now you have turned babbler you must be provided for accordingly. The wife can be easily dealt with. She is vain, silly, and selfish, and can be bought cheap."

Mr. Topsparkle was now in St. James's Street, in front of White's chocolate house, which was one of his chief resorts when he wanted to kill time between the morning undress saunter in the Mall

and the afternoon parade in the Ring. 'Twas here he heard the latest news of the town, such floating scandals as had not yet been transfixed by the *Flying Post* or the *St. James's Journal;* and it was here he met the innumerable gentlemen who were pleased to be bosom friends with one of the richest men in London.

"Why, Top," exclaimed one of these gentry—an easy-going young gentleman, who had spent a brace of fortunes, his own and his wife's, and so deemed he had earned the right to live upon his friends and the general public—"thou art younger by ten years than thou wert last week. Thou look'st like Hyperion new lighted on a heaven-kissing hill."

"And thou, Chambers, wast at the play-house last night, I take it; and supped on champagne afterwards, and art not yet sober," answered Mr. Topsparkle somewhat coolly, as he seated himself at his favourite table.

"Thou hast hit the mark, Top. Invite me to a dish of tea, and sober me; I have not the price of one in my pocket."

"Sit down then, and behave decently while the Bohea is brewing."

"Pekoe, friend, Pekoe; nothing like Pekoe to clear the fumes of last night's wine. Do you hear, waiter; Mr. Topsparkle's chocolate *à la vanille*, and a dish of your strongest Pekoe for Mr. Topsparkle's friend, with cream, scoundrel, with plenty of cream."

White's was full at this leisure hour before dinner, and there were many greetings for Mr. Topsparkle, of a less exuberant but no less friendly tone than that of Captain Chambers. He sipped his chocolate in a leisurely manner, looked about him, and listened, returned every salutation, kissed his hand to acquaintances at the further end of the room, and said very little. He was wondering which of all these men was most likely to be of use to him in the matter he had in hand. He wanted to obtain information of a peculiar character without appearing too curious on the subject. He wanted to be advised without asking for anybody's advice.

At any other time he would have received Captain Chambers's familiar advances with an icy reserve; but to-day he was inclined to be indulgent; for he

told himself that Chambers was just the kind of scamp who might be useful in an emergency; a man who, with his last guinea, had parted with his last scruple, a perfect specimen of the relentless gentlemanly villain, without heart, conscience, or honour, a scourge to confiding tradesmen, a traitor to trusting women, a bad son, a bad husband, a worse father, and a very pleasant fellow to fill a gap at a dinner-party.

"How's your wife, Bob?" asked a man at the next table. "I saw her in the Ring a week ago in the old dowager's carriage, looking as ill as if she was going to die and give you the chance of an heiress."

"Egad, I shall have to commit bigamy if she doesn't; so for conscience' sake she ought to give up the ghost," answered Chambers. "I have been seriously meditating running off with an Irish heiress, under a false name, and settling in some corner of her barbarous country, where I could live upon her fortune, and escape all the vexations of this accursed town."

"I don't think you should anathematise a town,

Bob, which has allowed you to cut a very pretty figure and to spend twice your fortune," said his friend.

"O, your damned shopkeepers have been civil enough," answered Chambers, lolling back in his chair and picking his teeth languidly. "I had a bevy of them in my dressing-room every morning teasing me for orders long after I was absolutely insolvent. But 'twas my tailor finished me."

"Indeed! How was that? Surely he never caught you in so soft a mood as to pay him?"

"O, it was a bite of the most diabolical nature. 'Twas soon after I married that the fellow began to get importunate. I had run up a pretty long bill with him—birthday-suits, hunting clothes, an occasional hundred on my I O U—when I was hard up for card-money. Your West End snip is generally a money-lender in disguise. I suppose the total must have been close upon four figures; but I had never bothered myself about the matter. One morning the insolent rascal congratulated me upon having married an heiress. No doubt he knew Belle's poor little fortune to a guinea. I thanked him for his

compliments in a manner which was as good as telling him to mind his own business, and next week he asked me for five or six hundred on account. 'Shillings, d'ye mean, sirrah?' says I. 'No, Captain, guineas,' says he; 'your bill, including money lent, is over twelve hundred.' This staggered me for I had not a sixpence of my own, and my wife's modest dowry of seven thousand pounds was tightly settled upon herself. I have always thought with Dick Steele that our new fashion of marriage-settlements is the most detestable form of bargaining that was ever invented. Mr. Snip looked black as thunder when I frankly confessed my inability to pay him till I dropped into an expected legacy from my East Indian godfather, who had long been ailing. Need I say that I invented the godfather and the legacy on the spot?"

"And was Snip satisfied to accept your Oriental security?"

"Alas, no. He told me that unless my wife would guarantee the payment of his bill he should be under the painful necessity of consigning me to the Fleet Prison and the tender mercies of that

notorious friend of humanity, Governor Bambridge. The fellow was evidently in earnest, so to make a long story short, poor Belle consented to be responsible for the scoundrel's account, and all went merrily for the next three years, when, after worrying damnably with lawyers' letters, of which I naturally took no notice, he put in an execution, and had to be paid off in a lump sum of 6859*l.* 7*s.* 11½*d.*, and poor Belle found her fortune was altogether swamped by this one liability."

"How did she take it?" asked his friend.

"Like an angel; and I believe she would have been a loving wife to the end, in spite of all my peccadilloes, debts, cards, and women included; but the old Dowager came swooping down like Medea in her chariot, and carried her lost lamb back to the family fold in Golden Square, where they all pig together upon shoulders of mutton and cow-heel, but contrive to keep up a show of gentility in the way of a worn-out coach and a leash of hungry footmen."

"Very wonderful are the struggles of polite poverty," said the other; "but it is still more won-

derful to me, Bob, how you contrive to keep out of the sponging-house, *criblé de dettes* though you are."

"Ah, that is indeed a miracle," replied Chambers. "I sometimes catch myself wondering at the long-suffering of my creditors. Yet their patience is not altogether unrewarded. I have introduced some very pretty fellows to my old purveyors. There are innocent young gentlemen from the country who would never know where to go for their finery if there wasn't an experienced man of fashion to put them in the right path."

"Ay, Bob, we all understand your pleasant ways. When a man loses the ability to spend on his own account, he may still flourish as the source of spending in others. Tradesmen are always civil to Captain Rook if he visits them in company with Squire Pigeon."

"'Sdeath, Middleton, d'ye mean to insult me?" cried Chambers, with his hand on his sword.

"Nay, Captain, I did but respond in tune with your own ethics, which were never of the strictest."

"Faith, you're right, friend! I was never given to riding the high horse of morality. I spent my

money like a gentleman, and my wife's money after it, and have earned the right to take things easily."

"Till you find yourself in the sponging-house, Bob. That evil day must come. All your creditors will not be equally placable."

"Whenever I get into the sponging-house, the odds are I shall be kicked out again for want of funds to make me worth keeping. Your sponging-house, kept by some dirty Jew, and waited on by a drab, is the most expensive hotel in London."

"Then they'll put you among the poor prisoners, and let you fetch and carry for those that are better off. 'Twill be a sorry end for Buck Chambers, the man who used to keep two servants to attend to his jackboots."

"Hang it! 'twas no superfluity of service. No man can be expected to do more than look after three horses or six pairs of boots."

"If they do nab you, Bob," said another friend, who had been attracted from a neighbouring table as the conversation grew louder, Mr. Topsparkle sipping his chocolate silently all the while, and listening in

a half-abstracted mood, only reflecting within himself much as Romeo did about the apothecary, that here was a fellow who would do anything for gold; "if the limbs of the law do get you in their clutches, let us hope, for the sake of a world that could scarce exist pleasurably without you, that they won't put you into Marjory's."

"Marjory's! What, the sponging-house in Shoe Lane!" cried Chambers; "'tis an execrable den, but not a whit worse than their other holes. I have hobbed and nobbed with my friends in most of their rat-traps, and know the geography of them. I'd as lief be at Marjory's as anywhere else, if I must needs have the key turned upon me."

"Not just now, Bob; for there was an honest fellow—an Exeter tradesman up in London for a holiday, and arrested by mistake for another—who died of smallpox at Marjory's only yesterday morning; and they say the disease rages in the house, and has done for the last ten days."

The Captain sprang to his feet in a fury.

"And yet they go on taking prisoners there," he cried; "poor innocent wretches, whose only crime

is to have lived like gentlemen! What a vile world we live in!"

"A vile world with a vengeance. Marjory's is a gold-mine for Bambridge. He claps all his prisoners into that hell, and makes them pay heavily before he allows them to be removed to the purgatory of another house, or the paradise of prison and chummage. This poor wretch from Exeter had not a stiver about him, so they refused to shift him. He was put in a room with three other men, one of whom was just recovering from the disease. The Exeter man took it badly, and died off-hand."

The Captain put on his hat.

"Farewell, friends," he said; "I'm off by to-night's fast coach to Bristol, and from thence to the wilds of Connemara. I was not born to be carrion for the vulture Bambridge."

He pulled himself together with a debonair movement, and staggered gaily out of the house, amidst the laughter of his friends.

"Was there ever such a good-humoured hardened villain?" exclaimed Middleton; "'tis a perpetual conundrum to me how he keeps out of gaol."

"He will get there some day," said a gentleman of clerical aspect; "our friend will have his penny-worth of prison, with a noose to follow."

Mr. Topsparkle paid his score, and sauntered away.

Not a word had he heard, nor had he made any inquiry, about madhouses, public or private; yet it seemed to him that he was wiser than when he entered the chocolate house, and that he knew all he wanted to know.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SMILES OF NATURE AND THE CHARMS OF ART.

Mr. Fetis slept until late in the afternoon, and awoke restored to his senses and so far recovered in his health as to be able to dress himself and go down-stairs. He was taking a cup of coffee strengthened with cognac in his wife's parlour when the Topsparkle orange and brown livery again enlivened the doorstep, and a note was handed in at the door.

It was a somewhat urgent summons from Fétis's patron and master.

"If you are well enough to come to me this afternoon, I should like to see you," wrote Mr. Topsparkle; "my messenger will get you a chair."

Fétis told the footman that he was able to walk, and would wait upon Mr. Topsparkle almost immediately. He followed the footman in about five

minutes, and was at once admitted to his master's dressing-room, where he found Mr. Topsparkle sitting before the fire, in slippers and a crimson brocade *négligé*.

"My good Fétis, pray think me not inhuman in sending for you," he exclaimed, in his airiest manner, "but if you have vital power enough to put my head and complexion in order for the evening, it will be a real benevolence on your part. I am to go to an assembly at Henrietta's, and I don't want to look older than poor Mr. Congreve, who has the aspect of a sickly Methuselah."

"I do not believe her Grace thinks so, sir," said Fétis, going over to the toilet-table and beginning to arrange his arsenal of little china pots and crystal bottles, brushes and sponges, and hare's-feet.

"O, for her he is always Adonis. But he grows daily more wrinkled and mummified, and he paints as badly as Kneller at his worst, which is saying much," replied Topsparkle, seating himself in front of the glass, a Venetian mirror, framed in filagree silver, which ought to have reflected beauty as young and fresh as Belinda's. "And so, my poor

friend," he continued with a sympathetic air, "you have been very ill. May I ask the nature of your malady?"

"I was as near death as I could be, I believe, sir," answered Fétis gloomily, still occupied with cosmetics and paint-brushes, and going on with his work as he spoke. "You will laugh at me doubtless when I tell you the cause of my indisposition, for you have a lighter nature than mine, or you could scarce live contentedly in this house."

"I have less education, and more philosophy, Fétis. That is the secret of my easier temper."

"I saw a ghost last night, sir," said Fétis, beginning his operations on his master's complexion.

"Indeed, my dear Fétis, I am told they swarm in the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury, where I hear you spent last midnight in most patrician society."

"How did you know where I spent my evening?" gasped Fétis.

"A little bird, my dear friend, a sweet little singing bird. Our London groves are vocal with such airy songsters. Pray keep your hand steady.

God's curse, fellow, that wash of yours is revolting when 'tis not laid on smoothly. You are too thick over the right temple."

There was a pause, during which Fétis finished his ground-colour and outlined an eyebrow with a miniature-painter's pencil.

"And so you saw a ghost last night. Was it in Denmark Street, St. Giles's, as you reeled homewards after your orgy?"

"No, sir, 'twas before I left Lord Lavendale's house. I had supped with his lordship and Mr. Durnford—"

"A fellow I hate!" interrupted Topsparkle; "a sinister, prying knave!"

"We had played cards for an hour or so, and I had been sole winner. I was in excellent spirits, elated, rejuvenated by my good luck. I had to pass through a suite of cold and empty rooms, dark except for the candle carried by my companion, Durnford, and a gleam of light from a lamp on the staircase beyond. It was in this semi-darkness I saw the shape of her whose death we compassed, in that room yonder, forty years ago!"

He pointed to the door opening into Topsparkle's bed-chamber.

"My good Fétis, you were drunk," said his master, without moving a muscle. "His lordship had plied you with wine till your highly imaginative mind was on the alert for phantoms. An effect of light and shade in a dusky room, a white curtain perchance, an optical delusion of some kind. I should have given you credit for more sense and less superstition."

"I tell you 'twas she, Margharita Vincenti. It was her face, sad, reproachful, as it has looked upon me many a time in this house. It was her figure, her attitude, standing there before me in the light of Mr. Durnford's uplifted candle, with all the reality of life."

"And yet in a trice the vision vanished, melted before your eyes?"

"Indeed I know not, sir, for terror overcame my senses, and I swooned."

"My good Fétis, you are in a very bad state of health. You need to be monstrously careful of yourself. These signs and wonders of yours presage

lunacy. Give me the hand-mirror. No, your eyebrows are not so successful as usual. There is a gouty line in the arch of the left, and you have given me a scintilla too much rouge. Pray tone down that rosy-apple appearance to a more delicate peach bloom. I think you are falling off in the composition of your red. There is a purple tinge that is too conspicuously artificial. You are a chemist, and should know more of the amalgamation of colours. You should try to imitate nature, my good Fétis. And you tell me you saw my poor Margharita's ghost, and that 'twas Mr. Durnford who held the candle that lighted the vision?"

"It was just as I have told you."

"To be sure. And pray do you happen to remember a certain young lady, an heiress, who came to the Abbey last winter, and who was the living image of my poor Margharita—whom you must remember I indulged and treated with all possible kindness so long as she was faithful to me—and on whose account you might therefore spare me your reproaches."

"I cannot forget my crime, nor who prompted it."

"Plague take you, Fétis, why use hard words? 'Twas but a sleeping draught made a thought too powerful, so that the sleep became eternal. 'Twas euthanasia. Had that girl lived her fate would have been an evil one. She was on the downward slope when death stopped her. She had ceased to care for me, and was passionately in love with Churchill. Do you suppose he would have remained true to her when the vanity of conquest was over and her monotony of sweetness began to pall? Deserted by him, she would have fallen a prey to some coarser profligate, and then the side boxes, and the hospital or Bridewell. Faithless to me, there was nothing but death that could save her."

"You might have made her your wife."

"Because I found her false and fickle as a mistress! A pretty reason, quotha."

"To be made an honest woman would have steadied her; you might have given her the company of her child; that is ever a mother's safeguard."

"Pollute my house with the presence of a squalling baby! No, Fétis, endurance has limits. Pshaw!

let us not harp upon this folly. Do you remember Mrs. Bosworth?"

"Yes; I saw her only at a distance. The likeness was certainly startling."

"And you did not know that the lady is now Mr. Durnford's wife? He stole her from her father's house t'other day, and Parson Keith married them."

"No; I had not heard that."

"And therefore could not guess that the ghost you saw in the dark room was no less a personage than Durnford's young wife, who by a freak of nature happens to be the living image of my dead mistress?"

"By heaven, it might have been so! I never guessed—I never thought—" faltered Fétis.

"Of course not. You have lost your head, my friend, since you took to cards and strong waters. Had you been content to drink like a gentleman, these fancies would never have addled your brains. I hope you betrayed yourself no more than by your swooning fit in Lavendale's presence. You held your tongue, I trust, when your senses returned?"

"I know not," answered Fétis, with an embar-

rassed air. "I left the house like a sleep-walker, scarce conscious of my own actions; nor do I know how I reached my own chamber."

"You are a sad fool, my dear Fétis, and, what is more, you are a dangerous fool," said Topsparkle, in his gentlest voice, and with a faint sigh. "The hand-glass again, please. Yes, that is better: the eyebrows have more delicacy than your first attempt. I want to appear at my best to-night. A man who has a beautiful wife should not look a scarecrow. You have a remarkable talent for touching up a face; a gift, Fétis, a gift. 'Tis an art that can be no more learnt than oratory or poetry. A man must be born with it. I am very sorry for you, my good Louis, sorry that tongue of yours is no more to be trusted. There, that will do. My valet can help me on with my wig. You are looking ill and tired. Get home as fast as you can."

"Indeed, sir, I am far from well."

"I can see it, my poor friend. Good-day to you. Tell my servant to bring me a dish of tea as you go out."

Fétis bowed and retired, gave his master's mes-

sage to the footman sitting half asleep in the anteroom, and went out of the house.

He had not left the Square before he was stopped by two shabbily-clad men, one of whom tapped him on the shoulder.

"You are my prisoner, Mr. Fétis."

"Prisoner, fellow! you are joking."

"No, sir; this will show you there is no joke in the matter;" and the man produced a paper which Mr. Fétis read with a troubled brow.

"This can be very easily settled," he said after a pause; "'tis but a bagatelle. I had forgotten that Mr. Bevis had sued me. The account is such a paltry one, and I have put thousands into Bevis's pockets. It is but fifty pounds. If you will accompany me to yonder house on the other side of the Square, Mr. Topsparkle will oblige me with the cash."

"Can't do no such thing, your honour," growled the bailiff, in a voice thickened by hard living and strong drink. "My orders are to take you straight to the sponging-house. You can communicate with your friends when you're there."

"But the house is within a few paces, and I tell you I can get the money!"

"The law's the law, and it mustn't be tampered with," said the man, "and duty's duty, and it's mine to see you safe inside the lock. Call a coach, Jerry; there's a stand in Greek Street," and so, with his arm held in the dirty grasp of a bailiff, Mr. Fétis was marched off to a coach.

In that trouble of mind which had been growing on him of late he had indeed almost forgotten that judgment had been pronounced against him at the suit of Messrs. Bevis, wine merchants, of the Strand, whose account, though he made so light of it, was one of long standing. Messrs. Bevis had filled and refilled Mr. Topsparkle's cellars since his re-establishment in London, and Fétis had been the agent and intermediary in all purchases of wine, choosing, tasting, approving, and had been courted and fawned upon by the Messrs. Bevis and their clerks. And now on account of a trumpery fifty-odd pounds for goods supplied to himself, he was to be locked up in gaol! He was astounded at the ingratitude of these wretches.

CHAPTER VIII.

"STILL THE PALE DEAD REVIVES, AND LIVES TO ME."

It was on the second day after Fétis had been deprived of his liberty, that the post brought a thick packet to Mr. Durnford in Bloomsbury Square, as he sat with Lavendale over a bottle of claret after the four o'clock dinner. The writing of the address was unfamiliar to him, and the characters had a blurred and irregular look, as if the hand that had traced them had scarce been steady enough to hold a pen.

He broke the seals hurriedly, eager to see the contents, for the post-mark was that of the next post town to Flamestead and Fairmile.

The letter contained an enclosure consisting of three other letters, the ink faded, and the paper yellowed by age. These were written in French, in a niggling mean little hand which Mr. Herrick had never seen before.

On the inside of the cover were these lines in the same illegible and tremulous scrawl as the outer inscription.

"SIR,—the hand of death is on me. Your wife never injured me, and I should like to do her a good turn before I die. The enclosed letters, which Squire Bosworth found on the person of your wife's father, were discovered by me in his bureau some years ago. They may help you to a fortune, and induce you to think more kindly of your humble servant,—BARBARA LAYBURNE."

Herrick hastily unfolded one of the three letters, and looked at the signature.

"By heaven, Lavendale, 'tis a strange world!" he exclaimed. "This letter is signed by the man who was here the other night, and his signature in this conjuncture, before I read a line of this correspondence, assures me that my suspicion is well founded."

"What suspicion?"

"One which I have hitherto hesitated to confide

to you lest you should deem me a lunatic. I have for some time suspected that the likeness between Irene and the portrait you and I unearthed at Ringwood Abbey was something more than an accident—that there was a link between the story of Topsparkle's past life and my dear one's birth—and here in Philip Chumleigh's possession are letters bearing the signature of Topsparkle's tool and accomplice. Before I read them I am convinced they will confirm all my suspicions."

"Read, Herrick, read. Thou knowest I am more interested in thy fortunes than in my own—for thine are the more hopeful. Read, Herrick, I burn with impatience."

Durnford obeyed, and after a careful comparison of dates read the first letter, which was dated Florence, July 20th, 1705.

"Mademoiselle,—It is with the utmost regret that I am constrained to remonstrate with you upon the contents of your last letter addressed to your father, under cover to me, and forwarded at your urgent desire by the Rev. Mother, who, when she so

far complied with your wish, was aware that she transgressed the rules laid down for her guidance by my honoured master, your guardian and benefactor, who desired that no communication should ever be addressed to him by you.

"Your address to a father who has long ceased to exist, can but be answered by the assurance that the noble Englishman who is generous enough to pay for your maintenance at the convent recognises no claim upon him of a nature such as you put forward in your vehement letter. He has provided for you from your infancy, and will continue to provide for you so long as you deserve his bounty; but he cannot submit to be persecuted by appeals to his affection, or by your foolish desire to know the secret of your birth, a knowledge which you may be assured could not add to your satisfaction or peace of mind.

"Be advised, therefore, my dear young lady, by one who is cordially your friend. Pursue the even tenor of your way, and ask no indiscreet questions of any one. It would be well for you, perhaps, if the piety of your surroundings should lead you to renounce the vanities of a troublesome world, and

to devote your life to the peaceful seclusion of the cloister. Should you make this election, your noble friend will doubtless contribute handsomely to the wealth of the convent in which your childhood and girlhood have been spent so happily.—Accept the assurance of my sincere respect, FÉTIS."

The second was a year later.

"MADEMOISELLE,—Your noble friend has been informed of a disgraceful intrigue in which you have engaged with an Englishman, who gained admission to the convent grounds under peculiar circumstances, and from whom you have received letters, conveyed to you by means which, although suspected, have not been as yet fully discovered by your custodians.

"I warn you that the pursuance of this intrigue must inevitably lead to your ruin, as your benefactor will consider himself absolved by your misconduct from all future claims upon him. But I hope to be able to assure him that you have renounced this folly and are in a fair way to renounce all other follies, and to devote your life to the service of God. You have

before your eyes daily so many touching examples of the beauty of such a life, that it would be only natural your heart should yearn towards the cloister. —With heartfelt respect, FÉTIS."

The third letter was dated Florence, December, 1707.

"MADAM,—My noble master commands me to inform you that he can recognise no further claim upon him, and that he can respond to no appeal from you or your husband, either in the present or in the future.

"He requests that he may be troubled by no further communications from you, FÉTIS."

"Devil!" exclaimed Lavendale, when he had heard the last of the letters, "nay, Satan himself, as I have read of him, has an amiable air as compared with this fish-blooded profligate—this worn-out *roué*, whose heart must be of the consistence of a sliced cucumber. I have no doubt that Irene's mother was Topsparkle's daughter, the infant whom he sent to

Buckinghamshire to be nursed, and doubtless carried off to the Continent with the rest of his goods and chattels when he left the country. And to think that he had not even one touch of tenderness for the child of the woman he murdered! There was no compunction—no remorse — not one sting of conscience to urge him to generosity. He could have seen the daughter starve with as unrelenting eyes as he saw the mother die."

"He is indeed a heartless dastard," said Herrick, "and I have no desire that my wife should profit by her kindred with him."

"O, but she shall profit, or at any rate he shall wince," cried Lavendale; "let me be your emissary, Herrick. 'Twill be easier for me to give him his jobation. I will make those old veins of his tingle; I will conjure up the vermilion of shame under that vizard of white lead. I will let him know what an English gentleman thinks of such conduct as his. God's death, but he shall feel again, as he felt forty years ago on the hustings at Brentford, when the mob rated him. If Hamlet spoke daggers to his mother, I will speak rotten eggs and dead puppy-dogs

to this Topsparkle. And he is *her* husband. *Her* husband! O, shame! O, agony! Herrick, I was an ass, a poltroon, not to run away with her!"

That was an old argument which Durnford did not care to reopen. He gave Lavendale the letters, urged him to be temperate in his interview with Topsparkle. But little good could come of raking up the unholy past. There was no evidence strong enough to bring the millionaire's crimes home to him in any court of justice. Fétis might blab his own and his master's guilt in a moment of excitement and terror, but face to face with the law, would doubtless recant. The lapse of forty years gave Vyvyan Topsparkle the best possible security against the consequences of his guilt. The history of his crime might be guessed at, but could never be proved.

"I will talk to the wretch to-night," said Lavendale; "yes, this very night. It is Lady Judith's assembly, by the bye, and all the world will be in Soho Square."

"You can scarcely enter upon such a discussion at a party," said Herrick.

"O, but I will make an opportunity; Topsparkle

shall take me to his private rooms. I am on fire till I tell that ancient reprobate my mind about him."

"And if he should challenge you ?"

"As he challenged Churchill ? Why, in that case I shall refuse like Churchill, and tell him that I only fight with gentlemen. But he will not challenge me. He will be too much afraid of my revelations when I tell him how Fétis has confessed to a murder committed at his master's instigation."

Each side in politics and all shades of opinions were to be found at Mr. Topsparkle's town house, as they were at Ringwood Abbey. Statecraft was represented by Walpole, who dropped in for a quarter of an hour, and who looked daggers at his sometime friend and ally, Mr. Pulteney ; by Carteret and Bolingbroke ; while literature had its representatives in Voltaire, whose epic poem, *La Henriade,* had been already tasted in private readings by the *élite* among his subscribers, although not to be published till next March ; in Congreve and Gay ; in the Scotch parson's son, Thomson, whose poem *Winter* was

being read and admired by everybody; and in that scapegrace Savage, whom Queen Caroline protected and whom Lady Judith courted out of aggravation to respectable people. All the modish beauties were there, from the fair daughters and granddaughters of the house of Marlborough to Mrs. Pulteney, secure in unbounded influence over her husband and several other slaves, reckless of his reputation and of her own, and insolent in the consciousness of superior charms. It was a strange medley gathering; but Lady Judith never seemed more in her element than in a social pot-pourri of this kind. She looked gorgeous in amber and gold brocade and the famous Topsparkle diamonds, the necklace which Caroline had worn at her coronation, a string of single brilliants as large as small hazel nuts, of perfect shape and purest water. A cloud of ostrich feathers about her head and neck softened the glare of her gems and the gaudy colouring of her gown. She looked like a portrait by Velasquez, fresh from the painter's easel, in all the brilliancy of colour newly laid on.

Lord Lavendale she received with her easiest air.

He found her surrounded by a circle of beaux and politicians, ambassadors and poets, keeping them all in conversation, alert and ready with answer and repartee at every turn of their talk.

The latest ridiculous anecdote about the King had put everybody into a good humour.

"You must take your fill of laughter and have done with it," said Lady Judith, "for I expect to hear my trumpeters strike up Handel's march at any moment, to do honour to our conqueriug hero's arrival. Their Majesties promised they would look in upon me after the opera."

"Then I hope you have ordered double your usual supper—plentiful as your banquets ever are," said Lord Carteret, "for it is a distinguishing mark of royalty to eat three times as much as the commonalty. The old Dowager of Orleans was always lamenting her son's excesses at the table—she has told me of his incautious gluttony with tears of affectionate concern, which his fatal apoplexy showed to be but too prophetic—and she assured me also that when the late king's body was opened it was found he was constructed on a different principle from his subjects,

and had twice their capacity for digestion. It was hereditary with the Bourbon race to gorge: and our Hanoverians seem of the same kidney."

Lady Judith turned from his lordship to welcome Mrs. Robinson, who came fluttering in after her triumphs at the opera, with Lord Peterborough in attendance upon her steps, proud to be considered her slave, yet ashamed to confess himself her husband, so strong were the prejudices of that great world which worshipped Senesino and Farinelli, and squabbled acrimoniously about the rival merits of Cuzzoni and Faustina.

"My dearest Anastasia, I hear you surpassed yourself in Rinaldo," exclaimed Lady Judith. "Topsparkle was there till nearly the end of the third act, and came away hysterical with rapture." Then turning to Peterborough, with the fair Anastasia's hand in hers, "Is your lordship still in love with Bevis Mount and solitude?"

"Could I but tempt your ladyship to visit the wild romantic cottage where I pass my time, 'twould be no longer a hermit's cell, but the temple of Cytherea," answered Mordanto gaily, "the mere fact

that you had been there, like a queen on her royal progress, would for ever idealise that humble dwelling."

"Have a care, my lord, lest I take you at your word some day, and put up at Bevis Mount for a night on my way from Ringwood to London. 'Twould be but to take the Winchester road instead of travelling by Salisbury, and it would be a prodigious joke to descend upon you as unexpectedly as if I were indeed the goddess and conveyed through the air by a team of doves."

"You should be received with adoration and rapture; yet I warn you that *my* Blenheim would scarce afford shelter for a fine lady's attendants, although it might be made into a not-unfitting bower for beauty unattended."

"O, my people should go to an inn, I would bring only Topsparkle to play propriety. How do *you* like his lordship's new toy, Anastasia?"

"You mean his cottage near Southampton? I have not seen it," answered the singer, with a cold proud air.

"Indeed, and can he like a dwelling you have not approved?"

"His lordship is eccentric in many things, my dear Lady Judith," replied Mrs. Robinson, and then she and her swain moved on and mingled with the crowd, making way for Lavendale.

"Your ladyship is in unusual spirits to-night," he said, after a few words of greeting.

"Yes, I am full of contentment. I met some friends of yours at the playhouse last night, that pretty Mrs. Bosworth and your *fidus Achates*, Mr. Durnford, and I was told all about their runaway marriage. 'Tis the prettiest thing I have heard of for ages, an heiress to renounce all her expectations for the lover of her choice. I saw how the land lay when they were together at Ringwood. But I am forgetting to congratulate you upon your success as an orator. Lord Carteret told me just now that you have astonished your own party and scared the Opposition, that you spoke better than Lord Scarborough, and that you are reckoned as a new element of strength in Walpole's forces."

"I shall be proud to be the ally of so great a man."

"What, you admire him as heartily as ever? You

are not afraid of his overweening ambition? Lord Townshend has been moaning about the palace this modern Sejanus has built at Houghton, and which almost dwarfs the splendour of poor Townshend's own place, which he had hitherto considered the metropolis of Norfolk. Every stone that augments the grandeur of Houghton is a stone of offence to Townshend."

"He will have to swallow them, as Saturn swallowed the substitutes for his children," retorted Lavendale lightly; "Walpole's power has not yet attained its zenith."

"Do you play?" asked Lady Judith with a wave of her fan towards the crowded card-room.

Lavendale accepted the gesture as his dismissal.

At this moment the trumpets began to blare the stirring march from *Judas Maccabeus*, and the hero of Oudenarde came strutting up the steps, between the flare and flash of torches held by two rows of powdered footmen.

"You may strut, dapper George, but 'twill all be in vain;
We know 'tis Queen Caroline, not you, that reign,"

muttered Bolingbroke, looking between the heads of

the crowd, with scornful lip and angry eye, full of hatred for the dynasty that had shown him such scanty favour. "What a vulgar little beast it is, to call itself royal!—royal, forsooth! a twopenny German Elector transmogrified into King of Great Britain and Ireland! If ever this country was ripe for a republic, for a millennium of statesmen and warriors, 'twas when good old Anne shuffled off this mortal coil. Yet such a nation of sheep are we that we must needs import a royal family from Hanover rather than be governed by native talent!"

He turned from the curtseying truckling throng with a bitter sigh and a bitterer sneer, thinking how fine a triumvirate might have been formed in the year Fourteen, if he and Oxford and Marlborough had combined their forces. He told himself that he had been born either too late or too soon. He should have lived in the old Roman days when talent was power; or in some enlightened England of centuries to come, when all hereditary distinctions should be swept away to make a clear stage for genius and ambition.

Queen Caroline and a brace of young princesses

moved about the rooms, with Lord Hervey and Mr. Topsparkle, Lady Hervey and Mrs. Clayton in attendance upon her majesty's footsteps; the master of the house proud to exhibit his curios and elucidate his pictures; Majesty showing herself supremely gracious, with a superficial smattering of art which went a long way in so charming a woman and so admirable a Queen. She had a smile for every one, kissed her hand to a score of friends, approved of Signor Duvetti's scraping on the violin, of Herr Altstiefel's organ tones on the 'cello, and of Signora Burletti's birdlike soprano in a scena of Lulli's and of Signor Omati's buffo bravura. There was a concert in progress in one of the inner apartments which the royalties honoured by their presence for at least a quarter of an hour, the princesses chattering all the time, and Princess Caroline so engrossed by the whispered nonsense of Lord Hervey, who happened to be standing behind her chair, as to be unconscious of her mother's reproachful frowns.

"I wonder whether the mature queen or the precocious princess is fondest of that man?" whispered Bolingbroke to Pulteney.

"O, the younger lady is fondest. She is romantically in love, while her mother uses Hervey as she uses all the world, for her own convenience and advantage," answered Pulteney; "yet I must needs wonder what is the charm of that sickly face and that effeminate manner, that all the women should adore him?"

"I think the charm is a kind of finnicking cleverness, a concatenation of petty talents which women understand. If Hervey had devoted himself to statecraft, he would have been a second-rate politician. His parts in great things would have seemed at best respectable; but by concentrating his abilities upon trivialities he appears a genius—and then, again, a man has but to flatter and fawn for the women to think him an intellectual giant, magnified by their vanity—just as a flea under a microscope seems a monster."

It was three o'clock in the morning, and Lady Judith's assembly was over, save for a few intimates who lingered in front of the fireplace in the hall, while the Swiss porter snored in his chair, and the

last of the linkmen waited despairingly for the departure of the latest guest. A couple of chairs were waiting on the pavement outside — Lord Bolingbroke's and Lord Lavendale's. Tom Philter was the only other loiterer, and those spindle-shanks of his were to carry him back to Gray's Inn Lane.

The royalties had eaten heavily and departed, much pleased with their entertainment.

"I thought the supper-table looked like a larder," said Lady Judith, fanning herself indolently, as she half reclined in a great carved oak chair. "Any one but a German would have been nauseated by such a plethora of food."

"But 'twas just what *they* like," replied Philter. "I saw your ladyship had all his Majesty's favourite dishes."

"I ought to know his tastes, after those wearisome dinners at Richmond Lodge, over which I have groaned in spirit on so many a Saturday," said Judith.

"Ah, I grant you, madam, those Richmond dinners are an abomination," retorted Philter, who

would have forfeited five of his declining years to have been bidden to one.

"The king is as fond of punch as his lamented father, who used to get amicably drunk with Sir Robert every afternoon, after a morning's shooting in the New Park at Richmond last year, when the minister had a temporary lodging on the hill there," said Bolingbroke.

"In spite of the Duchess of Kendal and her Germans, who did their best to cut short that pleasant easy conviviality between his Majesty and Robin," said Philter.

And now Bolingbroke made his adieux, with that blending of stately grace and friendly familiarity which constitutes the charm of the grand manner, and little Philter tripped out at his heels, leaving Lavendale alone with his host and hostess. Judith looked at him furtively from under her drooping lashes, wondering for what purpose he had lingered so long. There had been no word of explanation between them since that broken appointment last summer. They had met only in public, and had simpered and chattered as if the most indifferent

acquaintance. And now it seemed very strange to Judith, as a woman of the world, that Lavendale should make himself conspicuous by outstaying all her other guests.

"I have waited till the last, Mr. Topsparkle," said his lordship gravely, "in the hope that, late as the hour is, you would honour me with a few words in private."

"There is no hour in which I am not at your lordship's service," replied Topsparkle, with his airiest manner; yet there was a look of anxiety in his countenance which his wife noted.

"Is your business of such a private nature that even I may not hear it?" she asked lightly, hiding keenest anxiety under that easy manner. "Husband and wife are supposed to have no secrets from each other."

"That is a supposition which must have been out of date in the Garden of Eden, madam," said Lavendale. "Be sure Eve had her little mysteries from Adam after that affair of the apple had taught her a prudent reserve."

"Then I wish you good-night, gentlemen, and

leave you to a masonic secrecy," said Lady Judith, emerging with slow and languid movements from the depths of the great oak chair, sinking almost to the ground in a stately curtsey to Lavendale, and then gliding from the room, a dazzling vision of powder and patches, diamonds and ostrich feathers, alabaster shoulders and gold brocade.

She was gone, the servants had retired, all save the Swiss porter who dozed in his chair; and Lavendale and Topsparkle were alone in front of the hearth.

"Your lordship may converse at your ease," said Topsparkle, "that fellow has not a word of English."

He employed foreign locutions at times, like Lord Hervey, a modish affectation of the time which distinguished the gentleman who had travelled from the country bumpkin.

"I am going to speak to you of the past, Mr. Topsparkle. I am here to do you a friendly office, if I can."

"Indeed, my lord, I have no consciousness of being at this present moment in need of friendly

offices; nor do I think it is any man's business to concern himself about another man's history. · The past belongs to him who made it."

"Not always, Mr. Topsparkle. There are occasions when the history of the past concerns the law of the land—when undiscovered crimes have to be brought to light—and when wicked deeds, unrepented of and unatoned, have to be accounted for."

"As in the case of Mr. Jonathan Wild and his young friend Jack Sheppard," said Topsparkle. "Your proposition is indisputable. But did your lordship outstay the company to tell me nothing newer in the way of argument or fact?"

"No, sir; I am here to talk to you of your own crime, committed in this house, forty years ago; suspected at the time by a town which was not slow to give expression to its opinion; confessed only the other night by your tool and accomplice, Louis Fétis."

"The hysterical ravings of a drunken valet are about as trustworthy as the libels of electioneering pamphleteers; and I am surprised that a man of

the world like your lordship should concern himself with such folly," said Topsparkle. "The slander was as baseless as it was malicious."

"Yet it drove you from England."

"No, my lord; I left England because I was tired of a country in which the fine arts were still in their infancy. We have been improving since Handel and Bononcini came to London. In William's time there were not half a dozen good musicians in the kingdom. I wonder, Lord Lavendale, that you should take occasion to insult me upon the strength of a slander which I trampled out forty years ago, when my slanderers stood in the pillory."

"Mr. Topsparkle, there are crimes which never can be brought home to the evil-doers; but there are other wrongs more easily proved even after a lapse of years. I cannot prove you a murderer, though I have the strongest moral evidence of your crime: first from the testimony of your victim's grandfather, Vincenti, and secondly from the confession of your accomplice and agent. But one act in your life I can prove to all the world, if it should be

necessary to show the town what manner of man you are. I can at least demonstrate your hardness of heart as a father; how you, the sybarite and Crœsus, were content to let your daughter expire in poverty."

"I have never acknowledged a daughter."

"But she was none the less your child—the child born in this house—the helpless babe whose unhappy mother you and Fétis poisoned."

"'Tis false—a vile calumny—and you know it."

"'Tis true, and you know it. Your victim is gone beyond the reach of earthly redress—your daughter has been dead twenty years; but there is yet one living to whom, ere that frail, vanishing figure of yours melts from this earth, you may make some atonement for past evil. Your granddaughter, Philip Chumleigh's orphan child, is my friend Herrick Durnford's wife. To her you may yet act a grandfather's part."

"Mr. Durnford ran away with Mr. Bosworth's daughter."

"With Bosworth's supposed daughter only.

The likeness which that young lady bears to the picture at Ringwood Abbey is no accident, but the clue to a secret which my friend and I have discovered. Those letters from your confidential servant were on the person of Irene's father when Squire Bosworth found him lying dead on Flamestead common, with his infant daughter by his side."

He showed Mr. Topsparkle the letters from Fétis, scarce trusting them out of his own hand as the gentleman examined them, lest he should fling them into the fire. And then he related the circumstances of Irene's infancy: the nameless orphan and the little heiress brought up together; and how the Squire had been tricked by a malignant woman—a discarded mistress, eager to seize the first opportunity to do evil to her inconstant lover.

Topsparkle would fain have disbelieved the story; but that extraordinary resemblance between Irene and the picture was an evidence which he could scarce gainsay; while the existence of those letters from Fétis made a link between the past and the present. He had been startled and mystified by that likeness between the living and the dead; for

it was something closer and more significant than a mere resemblance of features and complexion; and there was the likeness of character, the hereditary type, the indescribable Italian beauty as distinct from every other race. No, Vyvyan Topsparkle was not inclined to deny the claim of this girl.

"I have no objection to acknowledge this young lady as my granddaughter," he said coolly.

"Do you think she would acknowledge you, did she know the story of your life?" answered Lavendale. "Happily for her she has been spared that knowledge. She knows not how her mother was abandoned by you, how her mother's mother was murdered in this house, where you can endure to live beneath the shadow of your crime."

"Your lordship forgets that I wear a sword!" exclaimed Topsparkle, clutching at the jewelled hilt of his thin Court rapier.

"Keep your sword for opponents who know less of your character than I do, sir," said Lavendale contemptuously.

"You deliberately insult me, and then refuse me satisfaction!"

"I will give you the satisfaction of a public investigation of this dark history, if you choose. Your victim's grandfather, Vincenti, is in England, ready to make his statement before a magistrate."

"That is a lie—a preposterous and impudent lie!" cried Topsparkle. "Were the grandfather living, he would be over a hundred and ten years of age."

"He is living, and in full possession of his faculties, whatever may be his age. He gave me a written record of Margharita's story, with all the circumstances of her flight with you, and of her untimely death under this roof."

"I don't believe it. The fellow must have been dead and rotten these twenty years."

"Come to Lavendale Court to-morrow, and you may convince yourself that he still lives—lives and harbours a most bitter hatred of you, Mr. Topsparkle. Old as he is, I doubt if you would be safe in his company, were you two left alone together."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Not to acknowledge your granddaughter. Kindred with you can do her no honour; and it is

better that she should be ignorant of the tie. But something in way of atonement you may do out of your coffers. Durnford and his wife are poor; they have the battle of life before them; and I am too near ruined to be of much use to them in the present or the future. When you make your will, remember your victim's grandchild."

"I will consider the matter at my leisure," replied Topsparkle haughtily, recovering his self-possession now that he saw there was no actual danger to be apprehended from Lavendale.

That blabbing fool Fétis was safe under lock and key, but not until he had blackened his patron's character. It was a hard thing to have the past thus raked up, after forty years: and by this man of all others; Judith's old lover, the one man for whose sake he had suffered the pangs of bitterest jealousy.

"I can scarce urge more than that on my friend's behalf," said Lavendale quietly. "Your conscience—if with advancing years conscience has been awakened—must be the only arbiter in this matter. But there is one thing I would add.

Your victim, Margharita, died unavenged; your wife, Lady Judith, would not be wronged with impunity. She has powerful friends, and to harm but a hair of her head would be fatal to him who did the wrong."

"I do not require to be schooled in my duties either to Lady Judith or any one else," replied Topsparkle, livid with rage under his artificial carnation, which had been laid on by a less cunning hand than that of Fétis, and which made hectic spots upon that death-like countenance.

Lavendale sauntered to the door, taking leave of his host with a low bow; the Swiss started from his slumbers and flung open the double-doors, and the link-boys ran forward to light the last departing guest to his chair; and then the heavy doors closed with a clang; and the great house in Soho Square sank into silence for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER IX.

"THE DEVIL'S DEAD, THE FURIES NOW MAY LAUGH."

Among the habitations of eighteenth-century London, it would have been difficult to find a more dismal den than that house of entertainment which Mr. Marjory and his family kept for insolvent debtors, and which, with two other houses of the same stamp, formed a kind of antechamber to the Fleet Prison, where Governor Bambridge at this period reigned supreme. Hovels there were more squalid, rottener roofs, and darker garrets than those of Marjory, within sound of Bow bells; abodes where crime was rife, and where midnight orgies and midnight quarrels were of a more brutal character than such as resounded under Mr. Marjory's roof-tree. But for sheer gloom, and for dulness and despair, the Marjory establishment was scarcely to be matched. There needed no inscription above the greasy portal

to tell that he who entered there left hope behind him. There was an atmosphere of hopelessness in that establishment which needed no translation in words.

And yet there were rioters who drank and gamed and put on a show of joviality within those abhorred precincts; but these were only the hardened few—reprobates so steeped in vice and ignominy, that they would have made merry in Newgate on the eve of an execution.

Louis Fétis had been a dweller in that sinister abode for more than a week. At the commencement of his captivity he had carried himself haughtily enough; had blustered and swaggered, and told his gaolers that the debt for which he was arrested wa but a bagatelle, which he should be able to settle off-hand directly he had communicated with his friends. He had sent a ticket-porter to Soho Square and Poland Street, with messages to his wife and to Mr. Topsparkle. There had been some difficulty about finding letter-paper, or he would have written; but he was too impatient to wait while Marjory's down-at-heel daughter hunted for a couple of sheets of

paper and a pen. The reply in both cases had been in the negative. His wife could not help him; his master would not.

"You have been drawing upon me very heavily of late, my good Fétis, and I have your notes of hand to the amount of some thousands," wrote Top-sparkle. "You cannot, therefore, expect that I shall hasten to your rescue, when a less forbearing creditor claps you in prison. Your house and furniture must be worth something; so, no doubt, Mrs. Fétis will be able to raise money enough to extricate you. For my own part, I am your milch cow no longer."

Mrs. Fétis informed her dearest husband, upon paper blotted with her tears, that she had not a guinea in her possession. She would have flown to him to comfort and weep with him, but the shock of his arrest had made her so ill that she was unable to leave her bed.

Fétis burst into a torrent of Gallic oaths after reading this affectionate scrawl. She was a traitress, a hypocrite, the falsest of women. She was glad to be free of him, to coquette with the fine gentlemen who frequented his house, to flaunt in brocade and

powder, and gamble and drink ratafia with those middle-aged bucks who had admired her on the stage, who had watched her dancing and simpering behind the oil-lamps in a ballet divertissement.

"She is a whited sepulchre," said Fétis; and then he sat down in a dusty corner of the shabby sitting-room at Marjory's, and sobbed aloud. He felt himself abandoned by all the world, alone in his misery like a poisoned rat in a hole.

"It is not the wine-merchant," he said to himself; "'tis these two—traitor and traitress—false master, false wife. These two have plotted together to shut me up in gaol. He fears me and the secrets I can tell, and he thinks that here the scorpion cannot sting."

He asked for pens, ink, and paper, intending to pen a denunciation of his late master for one of the newspapers; and again there was a difficulty. Miss Marjory could not find a sheet of letter-paper anywhere. It was odd; but there had been such a call for it yesterday, there was not a sheet left, and it was too late to get any out of doors.

"'Twill do to-morrow," answered Fétis moodily;

"what I have to write cannot be written in an hour."

He sat by the smoky fire, brooding over a letter to the *Flying Post*—a letter in which, without betraying himself, he should blast Mr. Topsparkle's reputation. He could not afford to speak plainly, but he could insinuate evil; he could deal in such slander as the town loved, and do infinite harm without risking his own neck.

The idea of this mischief comforted him a little; but when the next day came, he was too ill to rise from the pallet which he occupied in a draughty apartment on the first floor, where there were three other beds. It was a back room, looking into a yard, and affording a prospect of dead wall and water-butt. He was not alone in his indisposition. There was an invalid in the next bed, hidden from him by a faded old green baize curtain—a man who had been delirious in the night, but who lay for the greater part of the day in a kind of stupor. Fétis took both these conditions to be the consequences of a heavy drinking bout.

Under ordinary circumstances Mr. Fétis would

perhaps have hardly been ill enough to keep his bed all that November day; but he lay there in an apathy of despair, waiting for his fate; wondering helplessly whether Topsparkle would relent, and hasten to liberate him, and whether that false wife of his would think better of her treachery, and come to his relief. He had a racking headache, and he dozed a good deal. And so the day passed.

He got up next morning, in spite of heavy head and aching limbs, and went down to the sitting-room, where he breakfasted in his solitary corner, shunning all companionship with his fellow-captives —an elderly parson, a scribbler of the Philter type, and a decayed tradesman—all equally hopeless and dismal.

"We are kept here to swell Bambridge's profits," protested the parson. "Charges are being run up against us all for our commons in this wretched hole, and still worse extortions of a so-called legal nature; and I am told there is a fever of some kind in the house, and that we may all sicken of it before we are transferred to the Fleet."

Fétis heard almost indifferently. He had

entered that accursed house in a state of low fever, disturbed mentally and bodily. It seemed to him he could scarcely become worse than he was. He sat in his corner by the fireplace, sipping brandy all through the dreary winter day; would fain have attempted that letter to the newspaper, but there was again a difficulty about writing materials, and he had not strength to be persistent, and insist that he should be accommodated in that way. A lethargy was creeping over him; he sat staring at the dull fire, sometimes shivering, sometimes oppressed by heat. Next morning he awoke in a much worse condition, and could not lift his head from his pillow; next night he was delirious, and for more than a week he languished in a state betwixt apathy and raving madness; then came a lull in the fever, and one afternoon, in a lucid interval, he heard the word smallpox pronounced by an ancient beldame who had been the only attendant upon him and his neighbour; and then gradually—for there was a dulness in his mind which made him slow to apprehend anything—he began to understand what had happened to him.

He had been put into a room with a smallpox patient, and he was smitten by that fell disease. The house was infected; he had been sent there to his doom. It was Topsparkle's scheme for getting rid of a dangerous tool. The arrest had been prompted by Topsparkle; the whole business planned by Topsparkle.

He asked to see Mr. Marjory, and after much expostulation and heart-sickening delay the proprietor of the den appeared.

Fétis accused him of murder, of having entrapped an unconscious victim into his poisonous den, with deliberate purpose to compass his death.

"You have been bribed to get me out of the way," he said. "This house of yours is a *guet-apens;*" and then he entreated that he might be removed to the Fleet prison till his debts were paid.

"You'll have first to settle with me," answered Marjory, "and the tipstaff, and the warders;" and thereupon he produced a bill of nearly thirty pounds.

Fétis had entered the house with less than thirty

shillings on his person, and the greater part of those shillings had dribbled away in payment for drams. He had less than a crown left.

"Send for my wife," he screamed, "send for that cold-blooded hussy! I have a house full of furniture, I have powerful friends. Send for the Duke of Wharton."

"What, all the way to Spain? I doubt Wharton is almost as hard up as your honour, and could scarcely help you if he had a mind to it," jeered Marjory.

"Send for the Duke of Bolton."

"How many more Dukes would your worship summon? There is my little account, Mr. Fétis, and till that is squared you'll not budge. Smallpox be d—d! There's no such thing; 'tis a slander upon a respectable house to say so. Why there are but two or three pimples on your face, doubtless the result of a surfeit. Your neighbour has been down with an attack of jaundice from over-free living, but he's on the mending hand, and will be about in a few days. As for you, sir, I take it you have one of those timid constitutions

that can put themselves into an ague at the slightest hint of danger."

"Send me a doctor, if you won't release me from this devilish man-trap, and send for my wife instantly," cried Fétis, in an agony of indignant feeling, fear, wrath, vengeance.

Marjory left him to rave as he pleased. He was powerless to help himself in any way, and seemed as if he had scarce strength to move. He lay there impotent and raging, like a poisoned rat in a hole, as he said to himself again; there was no other similitude that fitted him so well. And so the short winter day waned till it was growing towards dusk. His neighbour in the bed behind the baize curtain was sleeping heavily. His stertorous breathing was the only sound in the room, intolerable in its monotony. His unseen presence was the sole company that Fétis had enjoyed for the last two hours.

Suddenly it seemed to Fétis that he might see for himself what ailed the man. If his disease were jaundice, he would be as yellow as a new guinea; if it were that hideous malady which

had been spoken of, the signs would be but too obvious.

Fétis gathered himself together with an effort, got out of bed, and plucked back the baize curtain.

There was a gleam of wintry sunset shining in at the window. It fell upon the sick man's face. God! what a face, seamed, scarred, ravaged by that foul disease! God's image for ever marred, humanity almost obliterated, by that dread visitation. He stood beside the bed staring at that disfigured sleeper, as if that sickening aspect had turned him into stone. Then he recoiled shuddering from that loathsome bed, the curtain dropped from his trembling hand, and he fell back upon his pallet in a mute agony of despair.

There was no longer room for doubt. He had been put into this contagious den with a deliberate purpose. This was Topsparkle's ghastly answer to his incautious menaces. He had aroused his master's suspicions, awakened his fears; and *this* was how Vyvyan Topsparkle defended himself.

He lay shivering under the dingy coverlet, his limbs like ice, his head on fire, meditating his

revenge. He was not going to lie there like an unreasoning animal till death released him from suffering. He would be even with Vyvyan Topsparkle before he died, brief as his time might be.

The beldame came in presently, before he had had time to shape his thoughts. She brought two basins of gruel, and a rushlight in a great iron cage, which she set up on the empty hearth, where it looked like a lighthouse shedding long slanting lines of light over a dark sea.

"You'll not want anything more to-night, will you, good gentleman?" she asked. "I'm going home to my family, and there's no one else in the house that cares to come into this room; so I hope you'll spend a comfortable night, and to-morrow morning old Biddy Flanagan will come and look after ye again. Lord! how sweet he sleeps!" looking down at the slumberer behind the curtain. "Sure, there never was such a cure; but I'm afraid his beauty is a thrifle damaged, poor dear sowl."

"What's the hour, woman?" asked Fétis.

"Sure, darlint, 'tis just on the stroke of six."

"And quite dark outside?"

"As black as your hat, surr. God bless your honour, and give yez a good night's rest!"

She was gone, in haste to return to her brood, and to feed them with broken victuals secreted about her person at odd intervals during her daily duties. 'Twas almost as tender a thing, though not altogether so honest, as the maternal ministrations of the pelican.

Fétis dozed for a little, wandered in his mind for a little, then woke with a start, perfectly lucid, and heard the clock of St. Bride's strike ten.

No, he would not lie there like a dog. He would find a way of escape somehow.

He got up, and though he reeled and staggered for the first minute or two, while he groped for his clothes by the dim glimmer of the rushlight, he felt stronger presently—much stronger than he had felt in the morning, when he tried to dress himself and gave it up for a bad job. It was but the strength of fever, perhaps, but it served. He shuffled on his clothes and went to the door. It was locked on the outside. Then he tried the window, a rotten old guillotine sash, which opened easily and hung loose

upon a frayed and rotten cord. He found a piece of wood in the fireplace, and propped the sash up before he dared look out.

His fellow-patient had been wakeful and slightly delirious in the earlier part of the evening, but had sunk off to sleep again, and was snoring heavily.

Fétis looked down into the yard, which was not more than fourteen feet below him. There was a water-butt in an angle made by the wall of the house and that of the yard, and there was a wooden pipe fixed in a slanting position to carry the rain from the gutters above to the butt below. This pipe passed within a few feet of the window, and Fétis, even at sixty-six years of age, and with a fever upon him, felt agile enough to descend by it to the edge of the water-butt and thence drop into the yard. It was a descent which a schoolboy might have made half a dozen times a day for sport. He buttoned his coat across his chest, clapped his hat firmly over his brow, and clambered out of the window, cautiously, slowly, seating himself upon the timber pipe, and letting himself gradually down the incline, hugging the wall as he went.

His slim fleshless figure and light weight served him well; he dropped from the edge of the water-butt on to the stone pavement as lightly as a rabbit; and then he had no more to do but to find an egress from the yard, which might prove impossible, and so all his work wasted. He groped about him in the darkness till he discovered a narrow passage which went under a house at the back of Marjory's, and opened into an alley. There was an iron gate which was generally locked; but fortune favoured the fugitive. One of Marjory's slipshod daughters had gone on an errand to the dram-shop in the alley, and had left the gate ajar. In another moment Fétis was beyond the precincts. He ran along the narrow court as fast as his thin legs could carry him, hearing voices and laughter in the dram-shop as he sped past its open door. A turn of the alley brought him into Fleet Street, and in his blind rush for freedom he nearly went head over heels over one of the posts that guarded the footway.

Late as the hour was, the business of life was not over. A train of heavy wagons and tired cattle

choked the road; a ballad-singer was shrilling a political ballad in front of a public-house, while a roar of festal noises testified to the carousal within. A street-fight blocked the rough pavement between Chancery Lane and St. Dunstan's, much to the discomfiture of an alderman, who was being carried westward after a City dinner, in a chair guarded by a couple of linkmen.

Fétis changed his pace from a run to a walk, hurried along, threading his way safely amidst all obstacles, scarce conscious of fatigue in that hypernatural condition of his mind and body. Yet he had sense enough to know that his strength might fail him at any moment, and was on the look-out for a coach or chair.

He saw a coach standing just inside Temple Bar, hailed the driver, who was half-asleep on his box, and jumped in.

"Soho Square," he said, "the corner of Greek Street."

He had five shillings in his pocket, which would be more than enough for so short a journey. The coach rattled along the Strand in a series of short

stages, having to pull up every now and then to make way for some heavier vehicle, and then by Leicester Fields to Soho Square, where the coachman pulled up his horses at the corner, as he had been bidden.

Here Fétis alighted—weak and tottering after the interval of rest—paid the man, and then crept off to a court at the back of the great house in the square—a court in which there was a private door of communication with Mr. Topsparkle's offices. This was the entrance and exit which Fétis had generally used in his attendance upon his master, and he had always carried a key to this door about his person. He had the key in his pocket when he was arrested, and he had it ready for use to-night.

He opened the door softly and let himself in then crept stealthily along a passage leading to the servants' staircase. This part of the house was a labyrinth of passages and small rooms, devoted to various domestic uses. He could hear the voices of the servants at supper yonder in the great stone hall, where they ate and drank to repletion at this hour, and where, Mr. Topsparkle and Lady Judith

being out, they were riotous in their mirth, and indulged in many a coarse jest at the expense of master and mistress, and the company they kept.

It was the hour at which all the restraints of servitude were thrown off, and when men and maids romped and revelled without fear of interruption; since the housekeeper had her own evening engagements, and was rarely home till midnight; and the steward might be relied upon as drunk and speechless in his private apartment, snug for the night; while there was no likelihood that Mr. Topsparkle or Lady Judith and her running footmen would be home before three o'clock in the morning. Her evening was a progress from one assembly to another, with occasional intervals at Opera-house or masquerade. She came home worn out, and sighing over the weariness of life. There never were such dull parties; 'twas a tiresome world, and she wondered at her patience in bearing with it. And then, if she were in the humour, she would bring home two or three of her satellites, and sit down to cards and ratafia until the late sunrise shone redly through

the cracks of the shutters, with the suggestion of a conflagration.

The passages and stairs were all in darkness; but Mr. Fétis knew every angle and every step. He crept to the back staircase, which wound itself sinuously upward between the state apartments and the offices, and then he ascended noiselessly to a narrow landing outside Mr. Topsparkle's bedroom. He opened the door of that sacred apartment, and went in. There was a fire burning on the hearth, and light enough to show that the room was empty. It was a small room, luxuriously furnished, the low narrow French bed draped with cut velvet of so dark a red that it looked black in the firelight. A great fur rug lay in front of the bed, and an immense armchair, with wings at the sides to screen off the draught, stood by the fireplace. A little spindle-legged tea-table, and an Italian coffer upon carved legs, completed the furniture.

Three choicest gems of Italian art, a Carlo Dolci, a Leonardo, and a Titian—cabinet pictures all of them—adorned the walls, and a Venetian mirror in a carved ebony and silver frame hung above the mantelpiece.

Fétis squatted in front of the fire and warmed his aching limbs. One of his shivering fits came upon him as he sat there, and his teeth chattered; but the fever was soon upon him again, and then he left the fire and lay down on his master's bed, defiling the embroidered Indian coverlet with the dust and grime of the street. It was a masterpiece chosen by Lady Judith at the India house where she spent so much money and wasted so much time; a rendezvous and gossiping place for her idlest acquaintances; a resort where reputations were murdered daily in the politest fashion, and where modish women envied and hated each other with unvarying civility.

Fétis lay on those Oriental roses and lilies, staring at the fire, wondering what Mr. Topsparkle would think were he to come in and find him there. But he did not intend to be discovered immediately. He meant to hide himself in that luxurious bower, to rise up like a spectre before his guilty master. There was a narrow space between the bed and the wall, just large enough to accommodate Fétis, and into this gully he slipped presently when he heard

approaching footsteps, and lay there among the voluminous folds of the velvet curtains, warmly and even luxuriously lodged.

Here he slept the sleep of exhaustion. It was daylight when he awoke: the fire was still burning, had been tended by the slave who kept watch in the great house o' nights.

Fétis could hear the light fall of wood ashes in the grate, and the monotonous breathing of his slumbering master.

He crept out from his hiding-place, and went round to the hearth. He seated himself in the deep armchair, warmed his aching limbs at the fire, and waited for his master's awakening.

He had slept long and profoundly, but he was unrefreshed by his slumbers. He drained a carafe of water that stood on the table by the bed, and sat waiting and shivering.

The clock struck eight, and Mr. Topsparkle stretched himself and rubbed his eyes. However late were his revels over-night, he invariably awoke at this hour. It was his habit to lounge in bed for an hour or two after that awakening, while

the day was airing; but his slumbers were generally over with the stroke of eight.

His first glance was at the fire, to see that his slaves had not neglected him, for the nights were chilly. Gazing dreamily at the burning logs and sea-coal, straight in front of him, Mr. Topsparkle was unconscious of that small slender figure beside the hearth, almost hidden by the side-pieces of the easy-chair. But as consciousness became keener in the newly awakened senses, as the passage from dreams to waking became complete, Mr. Topsparkle's instinct told him that he was not alone. He looked round the room nervously, saw that figure in the chair, the ghastly face covered with pustules, and gave a shriek of absolute terror.

"Tis a ghost," he muttered, after the first shock, "Fétis's ghost!"

"'Tis stern reality, Vyvyan Topsparkle, 'tis the pestilence that walketh at noonday. You sent me to an infected den, of malice aforethought, planned to trap me like a rat; sent me to die and rot there, lest this tongue of mine should tell how you tempted me to give your mistress her last sleeping draught when

you were alike weary of her charms and doubtful of her fidelity. You meant to make a swift end of a foolish babbler whose awakened conscience threatened your safety. But 'twas not so easy as you thought. I have brought contagion to your own couch, the venom of virulent smallpox has poisoned your pillow. I lay for an hour upon your bed last night before you came to it. Your down coverlet is tainted by my breath, your satin and velvet are reeking with infection. I slept beside you all night. 'Twill be a miracle if you escape the disease."

"You are a maniac," cried Topsparkle, "a malignant maniac; and I will have you clapped in a strait-waistcoat before this world is an hour older."

He lifted his arm to ring for aid, but the bell-pull had been plucked down by Fétis over-night.

"You have trapped me once," said the valet. "You shall not catch me so easily again. If I am to die, it shall be in my own hole, not in a trap of your choosing."

He opened the door and was gone before Mr. Topsparkle, helpless in the elegant disorder of his night raiment, could attempt to detain him. He

fled with swift footsteps from the house which had been the scene of murder forty years ago, and which had been hateful to this cowardly sinner ever since. Topsparkle was a bolder villain, and was not open to such influences.

A week later, everybody at the Court end of London was talking of poor Mr. Topsparkle, who was stricken with smallpox, a malady which at his age was likely to be fatal, despite the assiduous attendance of fashionable physicians, learned in the latest treatment of this terrible disease.

People talked even more of Mr. Topsparkle's wife, who, with heroic self-abnegation, had insisted upon nursing her husband. She had shut herself up in his room with the sufferer, and never left that tainted atmosphere. She had been inoculated three years before, at Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's entreaty, submitting to the operation rather in sport than in earnest, to please that clever eccentric, whom she loved partly for the lady's own merits, and partly because she was related to Lavendale. She had suffered a slight attack of the disease, which

her splendid constitution and high spirits had thrown off as lightly as if it had been but a fit of the vapours. And now, armed by this preparation, she took her seat fearlessly beside her husband's pillow; she ordered the servants in their goings to and fro between the sick-room and the outer world; she watched day and night, and took care that not the slightest detail in the regimen prescribed by the physicians should be neglected. She performed the duties of sick-nurse as one who had a natural genius for the task.

One night, in an interval of consciousness after a period of delirium, Mr. Topsparkle took his wife's hand in his, kissed it, and cried over it, and thanked her feebly for her devotion.

"I never expected that you would be so good to me," he faltered. "I know you never loved me."

"I owe you something for your indulgence," she answered gently. "You rescued me from genteel poverty; you let me waste your money as if it were water; and I have scarcely been grateful. I think it was less my fault than that of the world in which we live. It would have been so unfashionable

to be grateful or over-civil to my husband," with a sardonic smile. "But now you are ill, I feel that I may do something to prove that my heart is not the nethermost millstone."

"And when I am dead you will marry Lavendale."

"O, but you are not going to die this bout. You are better to-night. Dr. Chessenden told me this morning there was a change for the better."

"Would I could feel it! But I don't, and I doubt the end is near. And when I am gone you will marry Lavendale."

"He was my first love," she answered gravely: "be assured I shall marry none other."

"Well, I won't begrudge you your happiness. When my dry bones are mouldering in the dark it can make but little difference to me. You will have wealth enough to please yourself in a husband or any other whim. I made my will a week ago, and left you three-fourths of my fortune. The remaining quarter goes to a person who is represented to have a claim upon me."

"You are too generous; but, indeed, I have no desire for inordinate wealth."

"Nay, but you have a very pretty talent for spending. You will not discredit your position as Crœsus's widow any more than you have done as Crœsus's wife. There, there, Judith, I forgive all your follies. You have given me a good deal of pain at odd times by your flirtation with Lavendale; but, on the whole, I have been proud of you."

He lay muttering little speeches of this kind at intervals all that night; kissed his wife's hand ever and anon with maudlin fondness; was declared by the physicians next morning to be convalescent; and three days afterwards was dead; just a week after his valet had been buried in the churchyard of St. Giles's in the Fields.

Vyvyan Topsparkle's funeral was the most splendid function of the funereal kind that had been seen in London since the burial of the Duke of Buckinghamshire, and the most distinguished assemblage of mourners that had followed a hearse since the great ones of the land bore Sir Isaac Newton's

pall, and followed genius and philosophy to the grave, a few months before. As that frivolous great world had done reverence to intellect, so now it did homage to wealth and fashion. Mr. Topsparkle was buried in the family vault in the crypt of St. Paul's Cathedral, where the bones of his father the Alderman had been laid five-and-forty years before, in a sarcophagus of Florentine marble, sent from Rome by his dutiful son. The plumes, the sable horses, the mourning chariots, and procession of hireling mourners, the long train of fashionable carriages, made a striking impression upon the crowd in the Strand and Fleet Street, Ludgate Hill and St. Paul's Churchyard. Nor was Lady Judith, in her sable robes, the least imposing figure in that stately ceremonial. Calm and dignified in her sober bearing, affecting no false hysteria of grief, but shedding a womanly tear or two for poor humanity at those pathetic words, "Man, that is born of a woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery," she won the sympathy and admiration of all who looked upon her.

"I protest she is the most beautiful woman in

England," said Bolingbroke to Pulteney, as they stood side by side in the shadowy crypt.

"And the richest, Harry. Are you not almost sorry you are married—though 'tis to the most charming woman of my acquaintance?"

"Faith, Will, yonder handsome widow would be a glorious chance for a greater man than your humble servant, and my admiration of her only stops short of passionate love. Her money would have been my salvation; for I confess my own fortune has dwindled atrociously since I bought Lord Tankerville's place, and turned gentleman farmer; and my father's unamiable pertinacity in living might force his son to an untimely death in a debtors' prison, were there no such thing as privilege."

CHAPTER X.

"THE LITTLE HEARTS WHERE LIGHT-WINGED PASSION REIGNS."

Mr. Topsparkle had been buried more than a month, and the old year was waning. The logs were piled in the capacious fireplaces in saloon and dining-room, library and panelled parlour, at Lavendale Manor. The old servants were in new liveries; and such a store of provisions, butcher's meat and poultry, game and venison, eggs and butter, had been laid in to fill the great stone larder as would have afforded material for feasting upon a Gargantuan basis. Wax candles burnt merrily in all the lustres, and set the crystal chandelier-drops trembling; holly and yew, laurel and ivy, with waxen mistletoe-berries lurking in sly corners, adorned hall and dining-room, staircase and corridors; and there was a bustle and a movement through the old house such as had never been known there since the

early years of the late lord's married life, when the great Whig leaders, Somers, Sunderland, and Godolphin, with all their following, had been entertained at the Manor.

It was like the awaking of Sleeping Beauty's palace, after its century of stillness and slumber: only this time it was the princess, and not the prince, who was coming. It was not his bugle-horn, but her magic touch, which had scared the mice and the spiders, and startled the old seneschal from his torpor, and set the logs blazing, and filled the larder, and brought out the choice old wines from the cobweb-wreathed bins, and sent the sparks dancing up the chimneys, and made life where death had been.

Lady Judith Topsparkle was coming to spend her Christmas at the house where she was to be mistress, so soon as she and Lavendale should be married. They were not going to defer that happy day over-long out of respect for the dead, or out of deference for the opinion of the polite world, which was tolerably used to having its codes and customs set at naught in that merry era, and might be said to be hardened and scandal-proof.

"Let it be soon, love," he had said; and she had not gainsaid him. They meant to be married very quietly, and then to scamper off to the Continent, and rush from one old city to another all along the sunny south of France, and then drop down to the Mediterranean, and loiter on that enchanted shore till the fierce breath of summer drove them away; and then to Vienna, that enchanted city in which Lavendale and Wharton had led so wild a life, and onward to the Austrian Tyrol in quest of solitude, and mountain breezes cooled by the breath of the glaciers in that wild upper world where only the herdsman's hut suggests human habitation, and where the vulture and the eagle are easier to meet than mankind.

"Let it be soon," he said, as he stood with her in the house whence her husband's coffin had not long been carried; and she, with her white arms wreathed round his neck, as on that night years ago in the Chinese tent at Lady Skirmisham's ball, had answered tearfully, with a sad frankness which had a touch of despair in it,

"It shall be when you will, love. I care

nothing for the world, nothing for any one in this world or beyond it, except you. And you are looking so ill! I want to be your wife, that I may have the right to take care of you."

"A poor prospect for youth and beauty and wit and fashion, my dearest," he said, smiling down at her upturned face with love unutterable in his own. "You have had to bear with an old husband, and now can you put up with an ailing one? I think I am more infirm than Mr. Topsparkle, in spite of his threescore and ten. But indeed, love, I mean to reform—to forswear sack and live cleanly; or, in other words, to take good care of my life now it is worth keeping. I want to be sure of long years, love, now I am sure of you. I feel new life in my veins as I stand here with those sweet eyes looking up at me, full of the promise of bliss. Yes, dear love, I will defy augury. Why should I not be happy?"

Why not, indeed? He asked himself the same question on this Christmas Eve, in the winter gloaming, in front of the great hall fire which roared so lustily in the wide chimney, and sent such a

coruscation of sparks dancing merrily up to the cold north wind, that it was hard to be gloomy face to face with such a companion: hard to be gloomy when she whom he loved was coming to be his Christmas guest, to stay with him till the turn of the year; then back to the haunted house in Soho for but one night of lonely widowhood; and on the next morning they two were to meet quietly, unknown and unnoticed, at St. Anne's Church, there to be made one for ever.

She was coming. Herrick and his young wife were there to receive her. She was to bring her own little retinue: Lady Polwhele, and the Asterleys, and a certain Mrs. Lydia Vansittart, a young lady of good birth, small fortune, and easy manners, whom Lady Judith had taken up of late as companion and confidante—a woman of fashion must always have some one of this kind, an unofficial maid of honour, who retires at intervals, like the real article, to make way for a successor, and, unlike the official damsel, is not always certain of returning to her post.

Lavendale was not an admirer of Lady Polwhele,

nor of her led captain and his buxom wife, and indeed wondered that his mistress should keep such company; yet at the least hint from her he had hastened to invite them, and was ready to pay them all the honours of a sumptuous hospitality. Mrs. Vansittart he thought a harmless young person, but brazen, after the manner of damsels at the Court end of town. The author of *Gulliver* had talked of her openly as an insolent drab, but "insolent drab" with the Dean of St. Patrick's was sometimes a term of endearment.

Lord Bolingbroke had promised to spend a day or two at the Manor before the turn of the year, to inspect the home-farm, and compare its old-fashioned neglect with his own new-fangled improvements at Dawley.

"We will quote Virgil to each other, and fancy ourselves farmers," he said, when he accepted the invitation. "Perhaps I may bring friend Pope in my coach, and be sure those keen eyes of his will be on the watch for a trait of character in every particular of your existence—will hit off your house a n park, your table and friends, in lines that will be

as sharply cut and gracefully finished as a Roman medal."

Every bedchamber of importance in the rambling old house had been swept and garnished for distinguished guests. Irene and the housekeeper had roamed in and out of the rooms, and up and down the corridors again and again, before it had been decided which were to be my Lord Bolingbroke's rooms, and whether the bedchamber with the butterfly paper would be good enough for the poet.

"Be sure he will put you into one of his satires, if you lodge him ill, Mrs. Becket," said Irene: "they say he is as malicious as he is clever, and loves to lampoon his friends."

"Lord, madam, I'm no friend of his, so perhaps he'll let me alone," said the housekeeper; "but I shouldn't like to show disrespect to a famous poet. I only wish it was Dr. Watts or Mr. Bunyan that was coming: the best room in the house wouldn't be good enough for either of those pious gentlemen," added the simple soul, who knew not that both her favourite authors were defunct.

And now it was nearly dark on Christmas Eve,

and the clatter of Lady Judith's coach and six might be heard at any moment in the avenue. She and her party were to have dined early in London, and to arrive at the Manor in time for a dish of tea, and a substantial nine-o'clock supper of beef and turkey. The Indian cups and saucers, the melon-shaped silver tea-kettle, the dainty little tea-pots, and coffee-pots, and chocolate-pots, and those miniature silver caddies, in which our ancestors hoarded their thirty-shilling bohea, had all been set out in the saloon under Irene's superintendence; and Irene herself, in a rustling sea-green brocade, and her unpowdered hair turned up over a cushion, and her dark eyes full of light, looked as fair a young matron as any mansion need boast for its mistress.

Herrick, standing with his back to the fire, and his hands clasped behind him in a lazy, contented attitude, watched his wife in the light of the candles, as she moved to and fro in a restless expectancy: watched, and admired, and smiled with all a young husband's fondness, marvelling even yet that this beauteous, innocent creature could verily belong to him.

These two were alone together in the saloon, but Lavendale stayed without in the firelit hall, brooding over the fire, and waiting for the coming of his love.

"Why should I not be happy?" he asked himself. "Why should I not live to taste this golden fortune that Fate has flung into my lap—at last! at last! A broken constitution can be patched up again. A heart that has taken to irregular paces can learn to beat quietly in an atmosphere of peace and joy. I have burnt life's candle at both ends hitherto. I must be sober. Shall I despair because of that mystic warning, which may have been, after all, but a waking dream? Yes, I *will* believe that sweet sad voice—my mother's very voice—was but a supreme effect of a fevered imagination. I know that I was not asleep when I saw that luminous figure, when I heard that unearthly voice; but there may be a kind of trance in which the mind can create the image it looks upon, and the sound that it hears. Hark, there are the horses! She is here, she is here: and where she is death cannot come."

The clatter of six horses upon a frost-bound drive was unmistakable. There were a couple of outriders, too, and Captain Asterley was on horseback, making nine horses in all. The footmen ran to fling open the hall-door, the butler came to the threshold, Herrick and Irene appeared from the saloon, and Lavendale went out into the dusk, bareheaded, to receive his mistress. She was scarce less eager than her lover. She flung open the coach-door before footmen could reach it, and sprang almost into Lavendale's eager arms. She wore a wide beaver hat with an ostrich plume, and a long velvet pelisse bordered with fur, like a Russian princess. She was flushed with the cold air, and her eyes sparkled; never had she looked lovelier.

"Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear!" cried Lavendale, kissing her audaciously before all the world, and then holding out a hand to Lady Polwhele, who was closely hooded, and whose white-lead complexion looked ghastlier than ever where the cold had turned it blue. "What ample provision hast thou made against Jack Frost, love! Have you borrowed Anastasia Robinson's sables?"

"Do you suppose nobody but a soprano can wear a fur-trimmed coat?" she asked gaily. "I bought this yesterday, and I can tell you that it is handsomer than anything Peterborough ever gave his wife. They say she is really married to him, and she and her mother are established in his house at Parson's Green; but he has sworn her to secrecy, and won't even let her wear her wedding-ring."

"He is a fool," answered Lavendale, "and his pride is of the basest quality. King Cophetua was not ashamed of his beggar-maid. He knew his own power to exalt the woman of his choice. Mrs. Robinson is only too good for Mordanto, who will be half a madman to the end of the chapter. Welcome to Lavendale Manor, my northern princess. 'Tis but a faded old mansion for you, who are used to such splendours—"

"Do not speak of them," she said hurriedly, "forget that I have ever known them. Would to God my own memory were a blank! Ah, there is your young friend Mrs. Durnford smiling welcome at me, and her clever husband, too;" and Lady Judith ran into the house, and was presently embrac-

ing Irene, whom she had not seen since last winter.

Lady Polwhele and the two other ladies had stayed by the coach all this time, squabbling with the two maids, who had travelled in the rumble, and who were broadly accused of having left nearly everything behind, because this or that precious consignment could not be produced on the moment.

"I feel certain my jewel-case is lost!" exclaimed the Dowager, "and if it is I am a ruined woman; for it contains some of the very finest of the family diamonds, which are heirlooms, and must be given up to my son's wife whenever he marries. I wouldn't so much have minded my own rubies and emeralds, though the ruby necklace is worth a small fortune; and to think that careless hussy should have forgotten where she put it!"

"Indeed, your ladyship carried it to the coach—nay, 'twas Captain Asterley carried it, and your ladyship ordered where it was to be put."

"Ifackens, so I did, wench!" cried the Dowager, who was very vulgar when she was in a good temper. "'Tis on the floor of the coach, Lyddy, and I had

my feet on it all the way down. Lord, what a no-memory I have, child!" tapping Mrs. Lydia Vansittart archly with her fan, and ignoring the falsely-accused abigail, who stood by with an aggrieved countenance.

"I rejoice to hear your ladyship's memory is bad," said Lavendale, approaching the group with his courtly air, at once debonair and stately, "for in that case I dare hope you will forget the poverty of your entertainment at Lavendale Manor, and remember only how enchanted its master was to have you under his roof."

"Poverty, my dear Lavendale! Your house has a delightful air, and I am going to be ravished with everything I see in it. There is nothing so agreeable, to my ideas, as a fine old mansion which time has sobered down to a prevailing sombreness—the mellow colouring of centuries. I hate your newly-built and newly-appointed house, with its Italian pediment and marble floors, and its draughty comfortless rooms. Give me a house that my ancestors have aired for me. A man who inhabits a house

of his own building must feel like Adam, as if he had never had a father."

They were all in the hall by this time, and Lady Polwhele was warming her feet, which were one of her good points, at the log fire, turning about the little velvet slippers with a coquettish air, now making a Bristol diamond buckle flash in the firelight, and now bringing into play an instep exaggerated by a three-inch heel.

Lady Judith had flung herself into a chair, and had thrown off her hat carelessly, letting the loose disordered hair fall as it would about her face and neck. She had unfastened the fur-trimmed coat, revealing the snowy whiteness of swan-like throat and bust, and the glitter of a diamond cross, half veiled by a cloud of Mechlin lace. She was leaning back in her chair, sipping a cup of tea, which Irene had just brought her from the saloon, and looking admiringly round at the old hall, with its family portraits and family armour and jack-boots worn last at Sedgemoor, and dusty with the dust of a generation.

The other three women crowded round the fire,

Captain Asterley with them. His City wife had seen a good many grand houses since her marriage, and would not commit herself by admiring this one, lest it should be supposed she was overawed by its grandeur.

"There was a turn of the road in your park that reminded me of Canons," she told Lavendale.

"My park is but a paddock when compared with the Duke's demesne, my dear Mrs. Asterley; but I am flattered that even a branch of one of my trees should recall that splendid seat. Did you stay long at Canons?"

"N-no, not very long," faltered Mrs. Asterley, who had been admitted to the ducal palace by a side-wind of favour, to see the pictures.

Mrs. Vansittart was in raptures with Lavendale Manor. She affected a kind of hoydenish enthusiasm, rode to hounds, adored the country, pretended to know a great deal about farming, and was altogether of a masculine type of young lady.

"I hope there will be some fox-hunting while we are with your lordship," she said, "and that you can find me some kind of creature to ride. I am not

particular; anything, from a Godolphin colt to your bailiff's gray Dobbin, will suit me."

"We will try to find you something better than gray Dobbin, if even we cannot promise you the Godolphin blood," answered Lavendale pleasantly. "If the frost grows no harder, the hounds will meet on Flamestead Common early on Boxing Day; but I fear you will have a good many of the rabble out that morning to follow on foot."

"O, I do not mind the rabble. I am a Republican, and admire old Noll Cromwell better than any hero in history, though he was hardly personable enough for me to be in love with his shade. It has always been a wonder to me that we did not make an end of kings and queens altogether when good Queen Anne died. Instead of making all that fuss about Settlement and Succession, the Whigs should have taken the government into their own hands, elected Robert Walpole as their head, and carried on the affairs of the nation as easily as the Lord Mayor manages the City. Was ever anything so preposterous as to send for an elderly German, who knew not one word of our language, to rule

over us, just because he was a lineal descendant of King James I.?"

"O, but we couldn't get on without a king," cried Mrs. Asterley. "I love the look of the King's gilt coach and eight, or his gilt chair, with six footmen walking in front, and a body of soldiers behind. 'Tis one of the prettiest sights in London. And would you have no Drawing-rooms, and no birthnight balls, and no illuminations, and no trumpeters, and no beefeaters, when the King goes to the play?"

"We should get on just as well without any such raree-shows," said Mrs. Lydia contemptuously. "Give me a Roman Forum and Consuls elected by the people."

"Nay, child, I'm sure the Romans were no better off than we are, from anything I can hear of their Neros and their Caligulas," protested the Dowager; "and I quite agree with Mrs. Asterley that a Court is an indispensable institution. We must have somebody to make a fuss about, and though I allow that Germans are mostly savages, I am sure Queen Caroline is the nicest woman I know."

"Say that she is a great deal too good for her boorish husband, and we will all be of one mind with you," said Lady Judith; and then there was a move to the saloon, where every one clustered round the table, and where tea, coffee, chocolate, cakes, and toast were discussed with considerable gusto by people who had dined at two o'clock.

Judith was altogether the queen of the friendly little party. Lavendale helped her to take off the great sable-bordered pelisse, and she emerged from her furs in a gown of black brocade, which intensified the dazzling whiteness of neck and arms, and a black satin petticoat embroidered with silver. Her only ornament was a large diamond cross, tied round her neck with a broad black ribbon, but the diamonds were as magnificent as any to be seen in London.

"Was it not that cross which the Queen wore at her coronation?" asked Lady Polwhele, screwing up her wrinkled eyelids to peer across the table at the gems.

"I believe this was one of the trifles which her

Majesty did me the honour to wear on that occasion," answered Judith carelessly.

"I wonder she gave it back to you ; I wouldn't, if I'd been Queen of England. You should have sued me for it."

"I don't believe Judith would ever have found out her loss," said Mrs. Vansittart : "she has a plethora of gems. She lets me blaze in borrowed splendour sometimes, but I take no pleasure in my finery. 'Tis the sense of possession that is the real delight."

"Ay, I know that by sad experience," said the Dowager. "I detest the family diamonds because I know I shall have to see them worn by somebody else, if I live long enough. When I see Polwhele flirting with some scraggy minx, I fancy how she would look with my collet necklace on her bony neck. And he is such a weak young simpleton that I never see him civil to a young woman without expecting to hear next morning that he has proposed to her."

"I don't think your ladyship need anticipate immediate peril," said Asterley, with a significant

air. "From the kind of life his lordship has been leading of late, I should think there was nothing further from his thoughts than matrimony. A young man cannot marry *two* French dancers; and from what I know of the ladies with whom Lord Polwhele has been seen about town lately, if he marries one 'twill be at the risk of getting shot or stabbed by the other. O, I don't mean that the lady would murder him herself. She would get some serviceable Irish captain to invite him to a meeting in the Five Fields or at Wormwood Scrubs."

"You have no right to talk of such things, Asterley, and in the hearing of a mother!" whimpered the Dowager.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon; but when all the town knows the story—"

"The town reeks with malicious inventions," said Lavendale lightly. "I daresay young Lord Polwhele is not a whit worse than his neighbours."

Lady Judith leant back in her chair and listened with a supercilious air, as if she had been looking on at a gathering of ants and emmets. They sat and babbled about their acquaintances: how he or

she had run mad, and how people did such monstrous stupendous things that it was strange no fiery rain came down from heaven, or inward convulsion upheaved the earth, to wreak the vengeance of the Omnipotent on this modern Sodom. Lady Judith listened, and said scarce a word. Of course the world was wicked; she had known as much from her childhood. She had heard of gambling debts and family quarrels, elopements and suicides, madness, scrofula, hereditary hatreds, and fatal duels, in her nursery. There was nothing new in the latest scandal, only another turn of the old figures in the old kaleidoscope. She heard and smiled.

"My dear souls, how stale your talk is!" she said at last: "not one of your scandals has any originality. They sound as if you had adapted them from the French. They are reminiscences of the Regent and his *roués*. Confess now that they are stolen from the Philippiques."

"May I show you your rooms, ladies?" said Irene, "and then we might have time for some music before supper."

"O, hang music!" cried Miss Vansittart. "Wo

have music enough in London. 'Tis nothing but talk of Cuzzoni and Faustina, Handel and Bononcini, all day long; everybody fighting for his or her favourite singer: and 'tis dangerous to confess one admires Senesino, lest one should be torn to pieces by the votaries of Farinelli. Let us clean ourselves, and then sit down to a good round game—bassett, or pharaoh."

Durnford rang the bell, and the housekeeper came with a couple of maids, carrying wax candles; and the ladies gathered up their cloaks and hoods, and prepared to be ushered to their several rooms.

"One word, Lavendale," cried the vivacious Dowager, wheeling suddenly on the threshold: "is there a ghost?"

"There is the ghost which appeared to Saul, madam, in the twenty-seventh chapter of the first book of Samuel."

"Pshaw, coxcomb! you know what I mean. Is this fine old house of yours haunted? It ought to be, if you lay claim to respectability. Have you ever seen a ghost within these walls?"

"Not one, your ladyship, but a hundred. The

ghosts of lost hopes, the ghosts of good resolutions, the phantom of my boyish innocence, the shadow of my wasted youth, the spectre of my dissolute manhood. These rooms were full of ghosts, Lady Polwhele, till this dear lady," taking Judith's hand and kissing it, "exorcised them all by her magical presence. You will find no ghosts to-night. Love has laid them."

"*Au revoir,* Count Rhodomont: I think that should be your name," said the Dowager, as she skipped lightly off, followed by the other women.

Everybody was delighted with everything: the rooms, the fires, and bright clusters of candles, shining upon old Venetian looking-glasses in silvered frames; the oak passages, which would have seemed gloomy enough had the house been dark and empty, but which were now lighted by wax candles in polished brass sconces, and garnished with garlands of evergreens.

There was an air of Christmas gaiety and gladness throughout the house.

"And yet I am convinced there is a ghost," protested Lady Polwhele.

CHAPTER XI.

"THERE IS ANOTHER AND A BETTER WORLD."

CHRISTMAS EVE and Christmas Day were celebrated with all due observances. Lord Lavendale and all his guests attended the village church on Christmas morning, to the edification of the neighbourhood, which consisted of about a score of smock-frock farmers, with their labourers and dairy-maids, and a sprinkling of small gentry. Among these his lordship's party created a sensation, and almost every eye was directed to the big raised pew, with its carved wainscot and silk curtains, and its comfortable fire-place in an angle of the wall.

It was long since Lavendale had seen the inside of a church, and he looked round the village fane with wondering, interested eyes, and comparing it with the glory and vastness of St. Peter's at Rome, which was the last church he

remembered to have worshipped in, four years ago at an Easter service. He had come here to-day to humour Lady Judith, who had urged that, as they were going to live at Lavendale by and by, and to settle down into sober country folks, they ought at once to conform to the obligations of their position.

He looked round the church, and remembered the years that were gone, when he had sat in that pew by his mother's side, nestling in the folds of her brocade gown, or sheltered by her furred mantle, and following the words of the lesson in the large-type Bible open on her lap; his childish finger travelling along the line, his childish lips whispering the words. He, the unbeliever, had begun, as other children, in implicit trustfulness. The old familiar Bible stories came back to him, the vivid pictures of the old patriarchal life, full of reality, lifelike in their exquisite simplicity. How he had loved and believed in those old histories! how solemn and earnest had been his childish piety! Then came his orphanage and university life, amidst a reckless, impious crew; and then the Mohawk Club, and the Calf's Head Club, and an assump-

tion of blatant vice as a profession. He had been proud when he was told that society called him the bad Lord Lavendale, in contradistinction to his father, who had been the very pink and pattern of pious respectability.

Well, there was time to mend yet, time to lead a new and honourable life. The words of the ghostly voice were in his ear as the pitch-pipe gave the note, and the villagers began to sing "Hark, the Herald Angels":

"Repent, Lavendale; prepare to die!"

Yes, he would repent, but it should be a repentance made obvious by good works; his preparation for a better world should be the work of years.

"Why should I not live at least to sober middle age, as my father did?" he asked himself, and then turned to Judith, the chosen companion of those future years of happiness and virtue.

How beautiful she looked in the neat simplicity of her black silk hood, the sober propriety of her satin mantle and cambric neckerchief! She had attired herself thus modestly in honour of the rustic temple, and looked as she had never looked at a

fashionable assembly, in the reckless exhibition of her charms.

Lavendale thought of a couplet of Pope's as he looked at her.

To him his love was fairer with lowered eyelids and modestly veiled bosom, and arms hidden in long black gloves: how delightful a contrast to that painted hag of quality, Lady Polwhele, whose wrinkles no white lead could disguise, and whose Court finery looked hideous in the searching wintry sunshine! Mrs. Asterley, too, was as fine as brocade and ribbons could make her. Miss Vansittart wore a braided cloth gown, and a furred military spencer; and had a masculine air which contrasted curiously with Irene's simple dove-coloured hood and mantle, with pale blue ribbons, altogether girlish and innocent-looking.

The five ladies made a display which gave the villagers enough to think about all through the somewhat drowsy service and the particularly prosy sermon; after which the quality walked between two rows of bowing and curtsying Lubins and Biddys, to the lych-gate where the coaches were waiting.

Never had Lavendale felt in a serener frame of mind than on that Christmas Day. After the return from church he and Lady Judith explored the old house together, and planned what alterations they would begin next summer when they returned from their foreign tour.

"And can you really be contented to live three parts of the year in Surrey?" he asked: "to live a sober domestic life with a small establishment like this, you who at Ringwood had the state and retinue of a princess, and had your house filled always with a succession of the most distinguished people in Europe? Can your fiery spirit subdue itself to narrow means and domesticity?"

"My fiery spirit is passing weary of pomp and splendour and bustle and frivolity," she answered. "Fashion and rattle, coquetry and high play, served very well to divert my thoughts from an old love and an endless regret. But now I have my old love again and nothing to regret: fashion, cards, dice, lotteries, the flatteries of rakes and profligates may go hang—I can live without them all. I want nothing but love and Lavendale."

He took her through the library, on his way to introduce her to his old friend Vincenti.

She stopped in the middle of the room, and looked about her with a half-wondering interest.

"What a vast, sober, solemn—rather gloomy room!" she exclaimed, with a faint shudder.

"Think you so, love? It has no gloom for me. It was my father's favourite room, and my mother's: I have spent many a twilight hour with her before bedtime, have said my evening prayers at her knees on yonder hearth. It is more associated with her image than any other room in this house."

"Then I can understand your fondness for it; but I confess that for me it has a melancholy aspect. It will not be my favourite room. That sunny parlour facing southward will make ever so much brighter a nest, if you will let me furnish it in the French fashion, like Lady Bolingbroke's room at Dawley. And now take me to your ancient philosopher, of whom you have told me so much."

Vincenti received the beautiful stranger with a stately courtesy, at once foreign and old-fashioned, and altogether different from the flippant touch-and-

go of the "pretty fellow" period. Judith sat with him for nearly half an hour, talking of Italy, which she was to visit for the first time with Lavendale.

"I fancy it a land of romance and of opera, and that I shall hear the reapers singing a chorus as they stoop over their sickles, and see a cluster of dancers at every turn in the road; and that the innkeepers will all address me in recitative, and the postboys will all roll out buffo songs," she protested laughingly.

"That playhouse world is not Vincenti's Italy," said Lavendale: "*his* country is the land of science and philosophy, of Galileo and Giordano Bruno, of Vesalius and Sarpi."

The Christmas dinner exhibited a profusion which would have shocked Lady Dainty, but which was the only idea of hospitality when George II. was king. Hams and turkeys, chines and shoulders of veal, soup and fish, jellies, mince-pies, and the traditional plum pudding, with Burgundy and champagne in abundance; and even, for those who were coarse enough to ask for it, strong home-brewed ale, ale of a dark tawny brightness, betwixt

brown and amber, the very look of which in a glass suggested a swift progress from uproarious mirth to drunken stupor.

Lady Polwhele drank the home-brewed with the gusto of a chairman or a ticket-porter.

"After all, there is a true British smack about a glass of ale that beats your foreign wines hollow," she said, as she finished her fourth tumbler.

Lady Judith only sipped her champagne, just touching the glass with her ruby lips, smiling at Lavendale as she sipped. She sat in the place of honour at her host's side, and amidst that profusion of beef and poultry they two dined upon nectar and ambrosia, and were only intoxicated with each other's looks and smiles, and stolen whispers unheard in the clatter of voices.

For the evening there were cards and music; and anon the hall-doors were flung open to the cold night, and the village mummers came trooping in to perform their Christmas fooleries, and to be regaled afterwards with the remains of the feast. Then came Christmas games in the great hall: blindman's buff and hunt the slipper, at which last game Lady

Polwhele disported herself with a vivacity which would have been particular even in Miss Hoyden.

"The Dowager forgets that though 'tis meritorious in her to appear five-and-twenty, 'tis foolish to try to pass for five," murmured Judith, in her lover's ears, as they sat in a recess by the fireplace, watching those juvenile revels.

Buxom Mrs. Asterley rivalled the Dowager in exuberance, and contrived to be caught and kissed at blindman's buff oftener than she need have been, in the hope of rousing some lurking demon of jealousy in her husband's breast. But Captain Asterley only resembled Othello insomuch that he was not easily jealous; so the harmony of the evening was not interrupted by his evil passions.

Next morning came the fox-hunt. Lady Judith and her lover both rode to hounds, and his lordship sent a couple of led nags in their train, while he contrived to find a decent mount for Miss Vansittart. Judith rode as straight as an arrow, and, reckless in this as in all things, went at the biggest fence with a careless easy grace which delighted her lover.

"I did not know you were a hunting-woman,"

he said, as they rode neck and neck across a field.

"I am an everything woman. I should have died of the spleen at Ringwood, if I had not hunted."

"You did not while I was there."

"*You* were there; and I had something else to think about."

"And yet you seemed so cold, so indifferent," he said, slackening his pace as he grew more earnest.

"I had so much to hide, love, I had need to put on a show of scorn. Come on, sir; we shall lose the hounds if you talk to me."

The Christmas week was nearly over. It was the thirtieth of December. Lord and Lady Bolingbroke had joined the party: the lady something of an invalid, but infinitely gracious and devoted to her husband, who loved her passionately, yet delighted in boasting of his old conquests in her presence, a self-glorification which she suffered with much good-humour. Nor was she offended at his exuberant

compliments to his old flirt, Lady Judith, whom he reminded how pleasantly they had got on together at Ringwood Abbey, when his wife was nursing her gout at the Bath. He had elegant compliments even for Lady Polwhele, whose white lead had been laid on thicker than ever in his honour, and whose family diamonds blazed upon a bosom of more than Flemish development. He had not succeeded in bringing the poet. Mr. Pope had an invalid mother in his house at Twitnam, and could not trust himself away from home for above twenty-four hours at a time. There was some disappointment at his non-arrival, yet a general feeling of relief. Those bright observant eyes saw too deep into the follies and pettinesses of society.

It was in the after-dinner dusk of that thirtieth of December, and while his guests were all talking and laughing in a joyous circle round the hall fire before repairing to the tea-tables in the adjacent saloon, that Lavendale visited his friend in the laboratory. He had stolen away from that light-hearted circle while Judith was occupied with Bolingbroke's gay badinage, and now he sank with an

exhausted air into an old oaken settle opposite the table at which Vincenti sat reading.

Here there was no gloaming hour of rest and respite from daily cares. The student lighted his lamp directly daylight began to fade. He could brook scarce a minute's interruption of his studies. The lamp shone full upon Lavendale's face.

"How pale and tired you look!" said Vincenti. "I hope you are not ill?"

"I hardly know whether I am very ill or only very tired," answered Lavendale. "I ought not to have hunted the other day. I have not been my own man since. My London doctor told me I must never hunt; but I have no faith in physic or physicians. However, the fellow was right so far. I am not strong enough for a tearing cross-country gallop. And my blood was up the other day, and my second horse was fresh as fire. It was a glorious run: Lady Judith and I were with the hounds to the last, though three-fifths of the field were left in the lurch. No, I must hunt no more."

"You will be wise if you stick to that resolution. Do you think if I had squandered my strength upon

follies as young men do that I should be alive to-day? I have garnered the sands of life, my lord; I have measured every grain."

"I too will turn wiser. My days are precious to me now. Vincenti, do you remember drawing my horoscope t'other day?"

"Yes, I remember."

"And I told you not to show it to me, d'ye remember? A foolish, nervous, brain-sick apprehension made me shrink from the knowledge of my fate. But now I think I should like to see the result of your calculations: not that I promise to believe implicitly."

Vincenti's brow darkened.

"I would rather not show you the horoscope," he answered curtly.

"Why not?"

Vincenti was silent.

"And you had rather not tell me why not, I suppose?" said Lavendale, with a faint laugh.

"No, there could be no good — I can scarce define my reasons."

"Do you think I cannot guess them? The

fate foretold was diabolically bad, and you would spare me the knowledge of evil."

"There was nothing diabolical—nothing exceptionally bad—nothing—"

"But the common lot of man," interrupted Lavendale—"death! Only the common lot; but for me it is to come earlier than to the lucky. It is to fall just when I am eager to live—just as the gates of paradise are opening to me. I am standing at the gate—I see that paradise beyond, with the sun shining on it, the sunlight of passionate, happy, satisfied love — for me the unsatisfied. I am so near, so near — 'tis but one step across the threshold and I am in the enchanted garden. But there lurks the king of terrors—there stands Apollo with his fatal shaft: I am not to taste that ineffable bliss, the cup is to be snatched from my thirsting lips—that was what the stars foretold, was it not, Vincenti?"

"'Tis your own eagerness shapes the fear that torments you."

"Tell me that I have guessed wrong, that the stars promise long life."

"I will tell you nothing."

"Nay, you have told me enough. Your reticence is more significant than words," said Lavendale, rising and leaving the student hastily.

He went no further than the adjoining room, the old Gothic library, faintly lit at this hour by a wood fire, which had burnt low and was almost expiring. He seated himself by that lonely hearth in silence and darkness; sat brooding there, a prey to a kind of angry despair.

It was hard, it was hard, he told himself, a cruel sentence issued by the implacable Fates; hard and bitterly hard, now that his heart and mind were purified of all evil, now that he was free from sin, repentant of all his old follies, intent upon leading a good life and being of some use in his generation—hard, very hard, that the decree should go forth, "Thou shalt die in thy pride of life; thou shalt perish when thy heart is full of hope and love." The foreboding of evil was so strong upon him that he accepted the presage as it were a fiat that had gone forth. He struggled no longer against the despair, the conviction of doom. All was over. These brief hours of

courtship, this blissful fever-dream was to be the end of all; and then must come the grave, to lie in cold obstruction, and to rot.

He sat for more than an hour in the darkness and silence. The faint gray twilight outside the long meadows faded to the thick gloom of wintry night. He had flung on some fresh logs, and fitful sparks flashed out from these now and then, and filled the room with a bluish light that seemed almost sepulchral, as it were in unison with his thoughts of death. He sat brooding over the fire, with his elbows on his knees, staring at the slowly kindling logs. A ripple of laughter came upon his ear now and again from the distance. They were merry enough without him, hardly conscious of his absence, perhaps. Even *she* might forget him for the moment, now she had her adorer Bolingbroke to breathe honeyed words into her ear.

Would she forget him by and by, when all was done? would she grieve for a little, and then be gay again, and marry some one else, and go dancing gaily down a long perspective of idle foolish fashionable years till she became even as Lady Polwhele, and

took to white lead and ratafia, and quarrelling at cards and a led captain, and so on to unhonoured old age and grim death? He felt as if he could scarce trust her upon this planet without him, she was so light and frivolous a creature.

"She loves me passionately now, I know," he told himself; "she is mine, heart and mind and being, mine utterly, as though we two were moved by the same pulses, lived by the beat of one mutual heart; but these impassioned natures forget so easily. She will be dancing and masquing and flirting again before the grass can grow upon my grave."

He sat on till the logs had burnt and blazed and crumbled away on the hearth, and the fire was again just expiring. The clock struck eight. He had been brooding there for over two hours. He sprang to his feet suddenly, cold as death, great beads of sweat breaking out upon his forehead, and a strange tremor at his knees.

What was it—fainting or fear that so shook him? He turned almost as if to rush from the room in an agony of terror—and, lo! that strange soft light,

that faint brightness he knew so well, floated in the distance yonder, just within the furthermost window.

It was the figure he had seen before, a woman's form dimly defined against the dark panelled wall, like a luminous cloud rather than an actual shape; and the voice he had heard before spoke again in accents so unearthly that it seemed less a voice than the faint moaning of the wind which fancy shaped into words and meaning:

"To-morrow, at midnight, Lavendale, thou shalt be as I am."

The light was gone; the panelled wall was dark again. Lavendale snatched the poker, and stirred the logs into a blaze. There was nothing, nothing save that wildly-beating heart of his, to tell him there had been something there.

Next moment the door was flung open suddenly, and a bevy of his guests rushed into the room. A wild disorderly mob, as ribald a set as the crew in *Comus*, it seemed to him, after that unearthly presence which had that instant been there.

"What have you been doing, Lavendale?" asked

Durnford. "Is this the way you treat your guests?"

"The ladies were out of humour at having to take their tea without your lordship," said Irene.

"And if it had not been for the most exquisite game at hide and seek, we should have all had the vapours," protested Lady Polwhele; "but we have had mighty fun in your corridors and closets, Lavendale, and I think we must have routed all your family ghosts, and given a good scare to your antique Jacobite rats. Of course you have no parvenu Hanoverians behind your respectable wainscots? We have not left a corner unexplored in our revelry."

"It was a scurvy trick in your lordship to desert us so long," said Mrs. Asterley, "and I would have you look after Lady Judith, who is flirting with Lord Bolingbroke in the saloon."

"O, his French wife will take care there is no mischief done," said Asterley; "but indeed, Lavendale, you must join us at basset. We can have no fun without you."

"I am coming," said Lavendale, following them out into the hall.

Durnford looked at him uneasily when they came into the light.

"What were you doing, Jack, in that dark room?" he asked. "Had you fallen asleep?"

"No, I was brooding; brooding over my joy. Should a man not sit and nurse his happiness as well as his grief?"

"You have had a swooning fit, Jack. You are as pale as death."

"Well, I was near swooning with excess of joy; but 'tis over, and now I am ready for a riotous night. I will play you as deep, drink you as deep as in our wickedest days. There shall be no mirth too wild for me."

He went to the saloon, where his mistress was sitting at the harpsichord playing to Lady Bolingbroke, while the statesman stood with his back to the fireplace in a thoughtful attitude. There were no signs of levity here, at any rate.

Judith sprang up at his entrance, and went over to him.

"Why have you abandoned us so long?" she asked complainingly. "It was cruel of you to leave me to myself all this time."

"Could I leave you in sweeter company? But indeed, dearest, I have not stayed away for pleasure. I was busy."

"You have no right to be busy when I am in your house. All labours should cease but the labour of pleasing me," this with the spoiled beauty's air; and then, becoming all at once earnest and womanly as she saw the change in his countenance, "but you have not been busy. You have been ill, fainting. You are as white as chalk. O Lavendale, what has happened?"

"Nothing in this world, sweet, to vex you. I rode too hard t'other day for the pleasure of keeping near you, and I am no Nimrod, like Walpole and his great rival yonder. The hunting tired me."

"You must be in bad health to be so easily tired."

"Easily, quotha! Why, 'twas a thirty-mile run, and a fourteen-mile ride home! 'Tis only a goddess who can make light of such a day. But

are you going to play basset? and will you have me for your partner?"

"My partner in all things till death."

"Till death," he echoed solemnly; and they sat down side by side.

He seemed gay enough all that evening, and the wine brought the colour back to his face by and by; but every now and then in the pauses of the talk, when the others were intent upon the game, or at supper by and by in an interval of silence, he was thinking of the form and the voice that had been with him that night.

Could two worlds be so wide apart and yet so near—the world of life and the world of death? Not for an instant did he doubt that his mother's spirit had appeared to him; that her voice had warned him, and with no delusive warning. He told himself that he was to die to-morrow night. There were but one night and day left to him upon this upper earth: one night in which to repent his sins; one day in which to settle his worldly affairs, and bid farewell to all he loved.

Should he confide in his beloved? Should he tell Judith of the vision?

No; she would make light of it, or pretend to do so. Nay, in all likelihood she would be really unbelieving; she was too steeped in this world and in worldly follies to believe in that unearthly visitant. She would tell him his brain was unstrung, would try to laugh him into scepticism.

"I would rather believe, even though it is to accept the message of doom," he told himself. "To know that there is a God, and a world beyond, is better than long life upon earth. Man's life, did he live to a hundred years, were no better than the life of a worm if it ended here. But she who has been with me gives me assurance of a future. Where she is I shall be."

It was after midnight when the party dispersed; but, late as it was, Durnford followed Lavendale to his bedroom.

"I want you to tell me all about it, Jack," he said earnestly, as they stood together in front of the fire.

"About what?'

"The thing that has unhinged you. Something has, I know. You were frightened, you saw something, or dreamt something, in the library before we found you there, half fainting, almost speechless. There was something, Jack; I know you too well to be deceived."

"There *was* something, but I cannot tell you what."

"O, but you must, you shall. What is the good of our being brothers by adoption if you cannot confide in me? You have had no secrets from me, Jack. Till to-night I have shared even your guilty secrets, at the risk of being called Sir Pandarus by this good-natured world of ours. I have the right to be trusted. You told me about a warning last summer, a warning dream that saved you from a great sin. Was this another dream? Had you dropped asleep by the fire, and did you wake in a panic, as children do sometimes?"

"No, Herrick, I was broad awake."

And then, little by little, Durnford got the truth from him: the story of the vision as it came to him in the summer night, as it had reappeared in the

winter gloaming. To him, evidently, the thing was real, indisputable, an actual appearance, and not a projection of his own mind.

"I have tried to be sceptical about that earlier vision; I had almost schooled myself into disbelief,', he said in conclusion, "but now I know it is real. I know that my mother's spirit watches over me with a sweet protecting influence; I know that she has warned and guarded me, and that I shall be with her to-morrow night among the dead."

Durnford attempted no strenuous argument; his office was to soothe rather than to reason with his friend. He stayed with Lavendale till late into the long winter night; they two sitting in front of the fire, and talking of their past life together, and something of Herrick's future.

"I shall execute a new will to-morrow morning, Herrick, and I shall leave this place to you. It is not entailed, and although it is heavily mortgaged there is a margin, just enough to keep out the rats and mice. It will not be a millstone round your neck, will it, friend?"

"Jack, why insist upon talking thus, as if your

immediate end were a certainty? It agonises me to hear you."

"But it is a certainty. To-morrow—nay, this day is my last, for the new day has begun in darkness. At midnight I shall have passed from your sight. Do not let Judith look upon me when I am gone, Herrick. There is something horrible in the aspect of death, which might poison her memory of the man she loved. I would have her recall this face only as it was while that subtle indescribable something which we call soul still illumined it. Promise me this."

"I will promise anything that can content you. Yet I wonder that a man of your strong sense can talk of a vision which had its source only in your shattered nerves, with as much gravity as if it were a revelation from the Almighty. But I am resolved not to argue with you."

"It would be useless. I am perfectly serious, and convinced beyond all argument."

"I will laugh with you at your conviction after midnight."

"I pray God that we may have occasion to laugh.

Do not suppose that I accept my doom with content, Herrick. I go from a world that is full of delight. A year ago, I think I could have welcomed the summoner, but now— Let me finish what I was saying. I have a presentiment that you are going to become a great statesman—the Whigs will have it all their own way, Herrick; the Tories have had their hour and 'tis past—so this place will be a proper abode for you. It will give you an air of stability, and be a pleasant home for your holidays. Irene will like it, because it is so near the home of her childhood, and she and you may make your after-dinner stroll as elderly married people to the trysting-place where you wooed each other in the flower of your days. This old birthplace of mine, with its burdens upon its head, is all I have to leave to my adopted brother."

"I will remind you of your promised bequest when we are old men, Jack," said Herrick gaily; "and now good-night, or good-morning, as you please. Get to bed and rest, if thou canst, my fever-brained friend, or thou wilt have a sorry countenance for a lover at breakfast-time."

Herrick went to his own room sorely troubled

about his friend. The vision, or the fancy—dream, trance, catalepsy, or whatever name it might be called—had taken too strong a hold upon Lavendale's mind to be thought of lightly by his friend.

"There must be something done," thought Herrick, "or the very fantasy will kill him. He will die by the strength of his own imagination. I must consult Bolingbroke, who is the cleverest man in this house, if not in Europe, and he may suggest some way of diverting Jack's mind."

To Irene he said not a word, but after breakfast next morning, while Lavendale and Lady Judith were in the stables with a chosen few, inspecting the small stud and discussing future additions, Mr. Durnford found an opportunity to draw Bolingbroke aside.

"I have to speak with your lordship on a very serious matter," he said; "will you honour me with your company in the grounds for half an hour?"

"I am yours to command, my dear Durnford; but I hope your serious matter is nothing unpleasant. You are not an emissary from some unhappy devil among my creditors, who complains that my

patronage is ruining him? I have spent three times as much on Dawley as prudence would have counselled, and I fear I shall have to sell the place in order to pay for its improvement, so that some greasy cit will profit by my taste and extravagance. It is the curse of sons that fathers are plaguily long-lived. Lord St. John is a glorious example of patriarchal length of years. He has gone far to convert me to Biblical Christianity. I can believe in Methuselah when I behold my honoured parent."

"I should not be so impertinent as to obtrude the claims of a creditor upon so great a man as Lord Bolingbroke, were he even my own brother," answered Durnford. "Alas! my lord, the matter of which I would speak to you is one that money cannot mend or mar."

"Then it must be a very strange business indeed, sir, and I am all ears."

Herrick told Bolingbroke all that had passed between him and Lavendale last night; and then the two men talked together earnestly for a considerable time, walking up and down the wintry alley, where

two rows of clipped pyramid-shaped yews wore as verdant a livery as if it had been midsummer.

"One can scarce conceive that imagination could be powerful enough to kill a man," said Bolingbroke, after a long discussion, "yet I apprehend there is a state of the nerves and organs in which a mental shock may be fatal. I own I do not like the look of your friend this morning. There is a deadly pallor relieved only by a hectic flush which may deceive the inexperienced eye with the semblance of health, but which to me indicates an inward fever. The fancy about the vision of last evening may be hallucination, monomania, what you will, but the influence upon him is full of peril. All we can do is to try and distract his mind from dwelling on this one idea. Let us be as gay as ever we can to-day, and let the fair Judith exert her utmost power of fascination to make the hours pass quickly."

"And what if we shortened this fatal day by at least one hour, and thus curtailed his nervous agony of apprehension?" suggested Durnford. "We might easily put on all the clocks towards night, so that they should strike twelve when it shall be but eleven;

and then we can tell him the fatal moment is past, and that the ghostly warning has been belied by the passage of time. 'At midnight he was to die.' That was the doom the unearthly voice pronounced for him. He harped upon that word midnight: 'This is my last day upon earth,' he said: 'this night at twelve o'clock I shall be gone from you all.' If we could but delude him as to the fatal hour, laugh him into good spirits and forgetfulness, those shattered nerves of his might recover, and the poor over-strained heart beat evenly once again."

"I see your drift," said Bolingbroke, "and will do my best to help you. It would be difficult to take an hour clean off the night without detection. We must begin to doctor the clocks soon after dusk: say that we put them on ten minutes before they strike six, and that from that time to eleven we gain ten minutes in each hour. It will need some subtlety to manage the job, unless there are any of the household whom you can trust to help you."

"I would rather trust no one but you and my wife," answered Durnford. "Surely we three could manage the matter: there are only two clocks that

need be doctored: the eight-day clock in the hall and the French timepiece in the saloon."

"But there is his own watch, if he carries one: how are we to manage that?"

"He has half a dozen watches, all out of order; I have not seen him carry one for the last six months."

"Then there are our lively friends, who doubtless all wear watches, and who will betray us unless they are warned."

"True: they must be told something that will make them hold their tongues. I will tell them we have hatched a practical joke—or that it is a wager—cheat Lavendale out of an hour."

"You may leave them to me, I think," said Bolingbroke gaily, for to him the matter scarcely presented itself in its most serious light. "I know how to drive that kind of cattle."

"So be it: your lordship shall settle with every one except Lady Judith. I should like to confide my fears to her ear alone. She loves Lavendale devotedly, and if a woman's love could snatch a man from an untimely grave, she is the woman to save him."

His last day upon earth. Lavendale told himself that it was so, and listened nervously to the striking of the distant church clock, though he affected a gaiety which was wilder than a schoolboy's mirth. His feverish unrest alarmed his mistress.

"My dearest Lavendale, you have an air that frightens me, and you are looking horribly ill," she said suddenly in the midst of a conversation, as they paced an Italian terrace together in the noontide sunshine.

There had been a light fall of snow in the night, and the drifts lay in white ridges against the dark boles of the trees in the park, and the great gabled roof showed patches of white here and there under a bright blue sky.

"I vow it is scarcely courteous to cut me short with such a speech as that," cried Lavendale, "when I am doing my very best to entertain you with my good spirits. Would you have me as solemn as a mute at a funeral?"

"I would have you only yourself, Lavendale," she said, laying her hand upon his arm, and looking

at him searchingly. "You have an air to-day as if you were acting."

"Should I act joy, love, when my bosom can scarce hold its freight of gladness, when I can count the days and nights that must pass before you and I are one? If I live till that blessed promised day? Ah, Judith, there is the awful question: if I live? Life hangs on so frail a thread that a man well may wonder on the eve of a great delight whether he may survive to possess his joy. It is my burden of happiness that overpowers me."

"If every lover talked as wildly—"

"If every lover loved as well. But there shall be no more rodomontade; I will be as solemn as you like. *A propos* to acting, have you ever seen Wilks as Sir Harry Wildair?"

"Twenty times. You know I have been surfeited with plays and operas; I am delighted to be free of them; the very squeaking of a fiddle jars my nerves. Let us talk of our own future. How I love this place of yours! Its quiet, its old-world air, exercise the most soothing influence upon me."

"It is not to be compared with Ringwood Abbey either for size or grandeur."

"Why do you name a place I abhor? why remind me of my late bondage?"

"Ah, love, to make liberty sweeter," he said tenderly, drawing her to his breast. They had reached the end of the walk, where there was a circular open summer-house—a shallow dome supported upon Corinthian pillars, on the model of a classic temple—and here they sat for a few minutes on a stone bench, Judith wrapped in her furs and oblivious of the December atmosphere; Lavendale glad to rest that weary heart of his, after half an hour's sauntering up and down. Here they were remote from the house and from all observation, and could abandon themselves to lovers' talk about the future.

Judith harped upon that future with a persistence which agonised her lover.

"I mean to take such care of you," she said; "I mean to coax back the healthy colour to those pale and haggard cheeks. I shall be your sick-nurse rather than your wife for the first year or so."

"You shall be my divinity always."

"Only when you have grown stout and strong, when you have expanded into a robust country squire like Bolingbroke, shall I be quite at ease about you. O Lavendale, how fiercely you have burnt the lamp of life!"

"What motive had I for husbanding existence, when I had forfeited your love?

"Ah, dear love, we have behaved very badly to each other," sighed Judith, half in remorse, half in coquetry, the tender coquetry of a mistress secure of her conquest. "If I could only be sure that we loved each other all the time!"

"I can answer for myself," protested her lover. "My passion has never altered. In all my foolish wanderings I have had but one lode-star."

"What, not when you carried off Chichinette?"

"Do not name that foreign hussy, the offspring of a Flemish Jewess and an Auvergnat who cleaned shoes on the Pont Neuf. I had her pedigree from her maid, who was an unacknowledged sister. Can you suppose I ever cared for such a creature? She was as avaricious as Harpagon, as dirty as Lady Moll

Worthless, and she ate garlic and wallowed in oil at every meal!"

"And yet you ran away with her!"

"Dearest child, a man in my position was bound to run away with some woman at least once in a season. My reputation would have perished otherwise. As for Chichinette, the affair grew out of a drunken wager, and I was heartily sorry for it when I found you took the thing so seriously."

"Could I take it otherwise? Think what it was to love you as I did, to languish to be with you for ever like this," with her hand clasped in his and her head leaning against his shoulder, "and to know that you were at the feet of a French dancer. A year afterwards it turned me sick to see the creature on the stage, and I was near swooning in my box at the agony of disgust she inspired in me. But you are shivering, love. Let us go back to the house: you shall play me at billiards till dinner-time."

Then on the threshold of the temple she threw herself upon his breast and kissed those cold pale

lips, which even love's frank warmth could not colour.

"I forgive you Chichinette," she said gaily, "I forgive you all your elopements, everything that is past, for you are mine now and for ever."

"For ever, dearest."

"O, what a sigh was there! I protest you are the dismallest lover I ever heard of!"

CHAPTER XII.

"AND THE LAST PANG SHALL TEAR THEE FROM HIS HEART."

It was supper-time, and Lavendale sat at the head of his table, with Lady Polwhele on his right hand and Lady Judith on his left, in a room brilliant with the light of multitudinous wax candles and the blaze of a huge wood fire. It was a spacious apartment, with five long sash-windows opening on to a terrace with a marble balustrade, and two flights of steps leading to the lower level of the Italian garden—the prettiest summer room in the house, and by no means to be despised as a winter apartment when lighted and warmed as it was to-night.

Durnford and Irene had done everything to create an atmosphere of brightness and gaiety throughout the house, most of all in this room where the midnight hour was to be passed. They had summoned

a little band of fiddlers and pipers from Kingston, and these, stationed in the hall, were to enliven the feast from time to time with their homely, merry, old English tunes. The table was loaded with the usual substantial fare; but Irene's light hands had assisted the housekeeper in decorating the board with holly-berries and greenery, and such winter flowers as the gardener could find for her in an age when the first hothouse ever built in England was yet a novelty. The shining scarlet berries, the rich red and purple and gold of the Bristol china, the silver tankards and silver-gilt bowls shining under the light of the candles or reflecting the flame of the fire, produced a dazzling effect.

"Why, this is truly cheerful!" cried Lady Polwhele; "and though I over-eat myself at dinner, and have been cursedly cross with my cards all the evening, I long to put a knife into that turkey."

"Will your ladyship operate upon the bird?" said Durnford, placing the dish in front of the Dowager, who was a famous carver: "it will be a kind of divine honours for him, and rank him at once among the celestials."

Lady Polwhele squared her elbows, tucked up her ruffles, and proceeded to dissect the turkey with the calm dexterity of a great surgeon.

The champagne corks began to fly and the knives to clatter amidst a crescendo movement of talk and laughter, while Lavendale sat back in his chair and conversed in half-whispers with Judith, who also leant back in her chair, so that they two were, in a manner, apart from the gormandisers and merrymakers at the table. He was looking better than he had looked in the morning; but the glow on his cheek and the brightness of his eye were but the transient effect of the Burgundy he had drunk at dinner and the excitement of an evening at bassett.

He held his glass for a footman to fill with champagne, and drained it at a gulp.

"Aren't you going to eat something?" asked Judith.

"Eat! no; in your society I am too ethereal to eat. Mind has the upper hand of matter."

He drank his second glass of wine next moment.

"Champagne does not count, I suppose?" said

Judith; "and yet I never heard of sylphs that were wine-bibbers."

"A bottle of champagne is no more to me than a drop of dew to a sylph: there is nothing earthy about it. Look at Lady Polwhele devouring turkey and ham with the appetite of a chairman, and yet after supper she will be as *évaporée* as you please—a bundle of nerves and emotions. Hark!"

It was the eight-day clock in the hall striking the hour. Lavendale had made no comment upon the passage of time hitherto, and all his friends were inwardly chuckling over the trick that had been played him, which had been explained to them as a wager of Bolingbroke's. Could his lordship cheat his host out of an hour before the end of the year, he was to win a hundred guineas.

This time Lavendale stopped talking, listened intently, and counted every stroke.

"Eleven!" he exclaimed; "how late we are supping!"

"We sat so long at that devilish game," said Judith, who had been a heavy loser. "Well, I must resign myself to be unlucky at cards, if

'tis but at that price one can be fortunate in love."

To her, in a quarter of an hour's confidential talk after dinner, Herrick had told much more of the truth than had been imparted to Lavendale's other guests. He had implored her to do her utmost to distract her lover, to prevent his thinking his own thoughts, were it possible; to absorb him, interest him, bewitch him, as only she could.

"Alas, I fear all my weapons are stale, my armoury is used up," she said, with a sigh; "we have been so deep in love with each other, so frank in our love-making for this last happy week, that I have no treasures of tenderness, no refinement of coquetry in reserve. Like Juliet, I have been too lightly won, too frank—I have too openly adored. O Durnford, if I am to lose him at last, I shall go stark mad!"

"You will not lose him, if you can beguile him to forget his waking dream."

"Was it a dream? Was it not the presage of death, rather a physical influence, the poor decaying body conscious of the coming change? He had a

look of death this morning. There was an ashy grayness upon his face that horrified me. Yes, I was racked with despair in the midst of our talk of future happiness. And now you bid me be gay, when my heart sinks within me every time I look at him."

In spite of soul-devouring anxiety, Lady Judith had contrived to be brilliantly gay all the evening: as gay as Mrs. Oldfield in her most vivacious character, with all the charms of fashionable coquetry and modish insolence. She had laughed at her own losses, had challenged Lavendale and Bolingbroke to the wildest wagers about the cards, had been the leading spirit in reckless revelry, and had exercised a fascination upon her lover which had made him forget everything but that beautiful creature, leaning over the table with round white arms glittering with diamonds, and the famous Topsparkle necklace flashing upon the loveliest, whitest neck in England, showing all the whiter against the lady's black velvet weeds. Never had those glorious eyes shone with so brilliant a light; and Lavendale knew not that it was the wild lustre of despair. Her voice,

her eyes, the caressing sweetness in every word which she addressed to him, might have made Damiens forget his agony upon the wheel.

So it had come to eleven by the hall clock, and Lavendale had been scarce conscious of the passage of time.

"One more hour," he said, with sudden gravity, "and the year of his Majesty's accession will be over."

"Let us be merry while it lasts," said Judith; "let us see the old year out with joyous spirits. What say you to a dance by and by, when these people have finished their gormandising?"

"I will do anything you bid me—dance or sing, preach a sermon or throw the dice."

"No, you shall not dance. You are not strong enough for their robust country dances, and a minuet is too slow and solemn, though you and I excel in the figure. The other butterflies shall dance, and you and I will look on like king and queen. But let them finish their supper first; and we must have some toasts, political, friendly, sentimental. We will drink to the King over the

water out of compliment to Bolingbroke. We will drink George and Caroline because they are good honest souls, and our very intimate friends. We will drink to anybody and everybody, were it only for the sake of drinking."

"My lovely Bacchanalian," he murmured tenderly, "even vice is beautiful when you inspire it."

"O, 'tis hardly a vice to drown the dying year in good wine. I'm sure, could old Father Time have a voice in the matter he would like to die like Clarence in a butt of Malmsey," laughed Judith, holding out her glass to be filled. She had neither eaten nor drunk until this moment, and now her lips scarce touched the brim of her glass: she sat looking at Lavendale, counting the moments as she watched him.

The toasting began presently. Lord Bolingbroke rose, and in a speech full of veiled meaning proposed the King, waving his glass lightly over a great silver dish of rose-water which the butler had placed in front of him. Some drank and some refused, while everybody laughed.

"Your lordship might see the inside of the

Tower for that pretty oration, were one of us minded to turn traitor," said Asterley, as he set down his empty glass.

"I am not afraid," answered Bolingbroke. "I have a good many friends capable of playing Judas, but not one whose word would be taken without confirmatory evidence."

"As you are in the house of a man who owes title and estate to a staunch adherence to Whig principles in the person of his ancestors, I think you should drink to her Majesty Queen Caroline, who is a much better King than her husband," said Lavendale.

"O, to Caroline by all means," cried Bolingbroke; "Caroline is a capital fellow." And the Queen's health was drunk upstanding, with three times three.

Then came the toast of Woman, Wit, and Beauty, coupled with the name of Lady Judith Topsparkle, in a brilliant speech from Bolingbroke, who had swallowed as much champagne as would have made a lesser man dead-drunk, but who was only pleasantly elevated, a more vivid brightness in his flashing eyes,

a more commanding air in his fine and somewhat portly person. He spoke for twenty minutes at a stretch, and the company all hung upon his words with delight—could have listened to that gay spontaneous eloquence for an hour.

"Woman, wit, beauty, and the highest exemplar of all three, Lady Judith Topsparkle," cried Asterley, standing upon his chair, and waving his glass above his head.

There was a roar of applause, a guzzling of wine, a crash of shivered glass, as the more reckless drinkers flung their empty glasses across their shoulders; and then above that medley of sounds, came silver clear the striking of the clock in the hall.

Midnight.

Lavendale counted the strokes, listening with breathless intensity, his hand inside his waistcoat pressed nervously against his heart.

The last stroke sounded, and he lived. The beating of his heart seemed to him calmer and more regular than it had been all day. He had no sense of faintness or failing strength—a keener life rather, a quicker circulation in all his veins, a sense of

lightness and well-being, as of one who had cast off some heavy burden.

"Gentlemen," he said, "look at your watches and tell me—is that clock right?"

His friends pulled out their watches and consulted them with the most natural air in the world.

"Yes, your clock is right enough," said Bolingbroke.

"'Tis three minutes slow by my timekeeper," said Asterley: "I take it the new year is just three minutes old."

"Then 'twas an hallucination," cried Lavendale, "and I am a free man."

The revulsion of feeling overpowered him, and he broke into a half-hysterical sob; but Judith's hand upon his shoulder calmed him again, and he sat by her side as the fiddles and flutes in the hall struck up a joyous air, and the revellers left the table.

"Now for a dance," exclaimed Judith: "we have drunk out the old year; let us dance in the new one. Lady Polwhele, I'll wager those girlish feet of yours are impatient for a jig."

"Faith, my dear Judith, my feet don't feel a day

older than when William III. was king, and Lady Orkney and I were rivals," protested the Dowager, "and I am as ready to dance as the youngest of you."

"And yet I know for certain that she was a martyr to podagra all last summer, and could hardly hobble from the Rooms to her chair when she was at the Bath," whispered Lady Bolingbroke to Mrs. Asterley.

They all trooped out into the great oak-panelled hall, and a country dance was arranged in a trice, Durnford and Irene leading, as married lovers, who might be forgiven if they were still silly enough to like dancing with each other. Lavendale and Judith sat in the chimney-corner and looked on. The tall eight-day clock was opposite to them, and he looked up now and then at the hands.

Twenty minutes past twelve.

"We've jockeyed the ghost, I think," whispered Bolingbroke to Durnford, in a pause of the dance. "See how much better and brighter Lavendale looks. He was ready to expire of his own sick fancy. To cure that was to cure him."

Never had Lavendale felt happier. Yes, he told

himself, he had been deceived by his own imagination. Remorse or unquiet love had conjured up the vision, had evoked the warning. 'Twas well if it had won him to repent the past, to think more seriously of the future. The solemn thoughts engendered of that strange experience had confirmed him in his desire to lead a better life. It was well, altogether well with him, as he sat by Judith's side in the ruddy fire-glow, and watched the moving figures in the dance, the long line of undulating forms, the lifted arms and bended necks, the graceful play of curving throats and slender waists, light talk and laughter blending with the music in *sotto voce* accompaniment. Even Lady Polwhele looked to advantage in a country dance. She had been taught by a famous French master at a time when dancing was a fine art, and she had all the stately graces and graceful freedoms of the highest school.

Yes, it was a pretty sight, Lavendale thought, a prodigiously pleasant sight; but it all had a dream-like air, as everything seemed to have to-night. Even Judith's face as he gazed at it had the look of

a face in a dream. There was an unreality about all things that he looked upon. Indeed, nothing in his life had seemed real since that vision and that mystic voice in the winter dusk last night.

Suddenly those tripping figures reeled and rocked as he gazed at them, and then the perspective of the hall seemed to lengthen out into infinite distance, and then a veil of semi-darkness swept over all things, and he staggered to his feet.

"Air, air! I am choking!" he cried hoarsely.

That hoarse strange cry stopped the dance as by the stroke of an enchanter's wand. Bolingbroke ran to the hall-door, and threw it wide open. A rush of cold air streamed into the hall, and blew that darkening veil off the picture.

"Thank God," said Lavendale, "I can breathe again! Pray pardon me, ladies, and go on with your dance," he added courteously; and then, half-leaning upon Bolingbroke, he walked slowly out to the terrace in front of the porch, Judith accompanying him.

Here he sat upon a stone bench, and the cool still night restored all his senses.

"I am well now, my dear friend," he said to Bolingbroke; "'twas only a passing faintness. The fumes of the log fire stupefied me."

"And here you will catch a consumption, if you sit in this cold air," returned his friend, while Judith hung over him with a white scared face, full of keenest anxiety.

"It is not cold, but if you are afraid of your gout—"

"I am, my dear Lavendale, so I will leave Lady Judith to take care of you for a few minutes—I urgently advise you to stay no longer than that. Are you sure you are quite recovered?"

"Quite recovered. Infinitely happy," murmured Lavendale, in a dreamy voice, with his hand in Judith's, looking up at her as she stood by his side.

Bolingbroke left them discreetly. To the old intriguer it seemed the most natural thing in the world to leave those two alone together.

"How fond they are of each other!" he said to himself; "'tis a pity poor Lavendale is so marked for death. And yet perhaps he may live long enough for them to get tired of each other;

so short a time is sometimes long enough for satiety."

"My beloved, a few minutes ago I thought I was dying," said Lavendale, in a low voice. "Had that deadly swooning come about an hour earlier, I should have said to myself, 'This is the stroke of death.'"

"Why, dearest love?"

"Because it has been prophesied to me that I should die at midnight."

"Idle prophecy. Midnight is past, and we are here, you and I together, happy in each other's love," said Judith.

"You are trembling in every limb!"

"It is the cold."

"No, it is not the cold, Judith: your face is full of fear. Do you see death in mine?"

"I see only love, infinite love, the promise of our new life in the glad new year."

"Judith," he murmured, leaning his head against her bosom as she leant over him, "I know not if I am happy or miserable; I know only that I

am with you: past and future are lost in darkness. But indeed you are shivering. You are not cold, are you, love? It is such a lovely night, so still, so calm."

It was one of those exquisite nights which come sometimes in mid-winter. Not a breath of wind stirred the light leafage of the shrubs, or waved the pine-tops yonder. A light fall of snow had whitened the garden-walks, but left the shrubberies untouched. The moon was at the full, and every line and every leaf showed clear in that silver light. The distant landscape glimmered in a luminous haze, deepening to purple as it touched the horizon; while here and there in the valley a glint of brighter silver showed where the river wound among low hills and dusky islets towards the busier world beyond.

Suddenly, silver sweet in the moonlight and the silence, came the musical fall of a peal of bells—joy-bells from the distant tower of Flamestead Church—joy-bells ringing in the new year.

"My God!" cried Lavendale, "the clocks were wrong!"

He gazed at Judith with wide distended eyes, and

the ghastly pallor on his face took a more livid hue.

"Beloved, my mother's ghost spoke truth," he said: "death calls me with the stroke of midnight. Beloved, beloved, never, never, never to be mine! But O, 'tis more blessed than all I have known of life to die here—thus."

His head was on her breast, her arms were wreathed round him, supporting that heavy brow, on which the death-dews were gathering. Yes, it was death. The cord, worn to attenuation long ago, had snapped at last; the last sands of that wasted life had run out; and just when life seemed worth living, death called the repentant sinner from the arms of love.

From the earthly love to love beyond, from the known to the unknown. In that swift, sudden passage from life to death, he had been less of an infidel than in the active life behind him. It had seemed to him that a gate opened into the dim distance of eternity; that he stretched out his arms to some one or to something that called and beckoned; that he went not to outer darkness and extinction, but to

a new existence. Yet the wrench was scarce less bitter, since it parted him from the woman he loved.

Friendly hands carried that lifeless form into the old house, and laid the dead Lord Lavendale upon the bed where his father had lain before him in the same funeral solemnity. Curtains and blinds were drawn in all the windows; the guests, who had been so merry at the feast on New Year's Eve, hurried off on New Year's morning as fast as coach-horses could be got to carry them away; and the year began at Lavendale Manor in the shadow of mourning. Only Herrick and Irene stayed in the darkened house, and watched and prayed in the death-chamber.

And so the house of Lavendale expired with its last representative. Name and race vanished suddenly from the eyes of men like a ship that founders at sea.

Deeper yet drew the death shadows on Lavendale Manor House, for on the morning of Lord Lavendale's funeral the old Venetian chemist was found cold and stark beside his furnace, the elixir of life, the uni-

versal panacea, simmering in the crucible beside him, and his attenuated fingers clasping one of those antique guides to immortality, fraught with the wisdom of old Arabia, which had been his solace and delight. The shock of his friend and patron's death had accelerated the inevitable end. The lamp of life, nursed in solitude, economised by habits of exceptional temperance, had burned to the last drop of oil, and the discoverer, baulked in all his searching after the supernatural, had yet succeeded in living to his hundred and eleventh year.

Three years afterwards, and Herrick and Irene were living with their two children at Lavendale Manor, and the fences that parted manor and court had been thrown down, and the two estates were as one, the old squire having settled Fairmile Court and all its belongings upon his adopted daughter, whose husband was to assume the name of Bosworth in addition to his own, and to sign himself Durnford-Bosworth henceforward. Time is the best of all peace-makers, and after nursing his wrath for a year or two Roland Bosworth had discovered that

the orphan he had picked up on Flamestead Common was dearer to him than resentment or wounded pride. Perhaps he was all the better pleased to endow the changeling since Mr. Topsparkle's magnificent bequest had made her independent of his bounty.

To Lavendale Manor every New Year's Eve comes a pensive lady to pass sad hours in solitude and silence and pious prayers and meditations in those rooms which were once so full of mirth. Alone she paces the terrace in moonlight or in darkness: alone she keeps her midnight vigil, and prays and weeps upon that stone bench where her lover died.

Irene and her husband respect the mourner's solitude, and in their pity for an inconsolable grief they scarce lament the change in that beautiful face which is but too prophetic of doom. Not again will that widowed heart ache at the sound of New Year joy-bells, for their merry peal will ring above her grave.

THE END.

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